

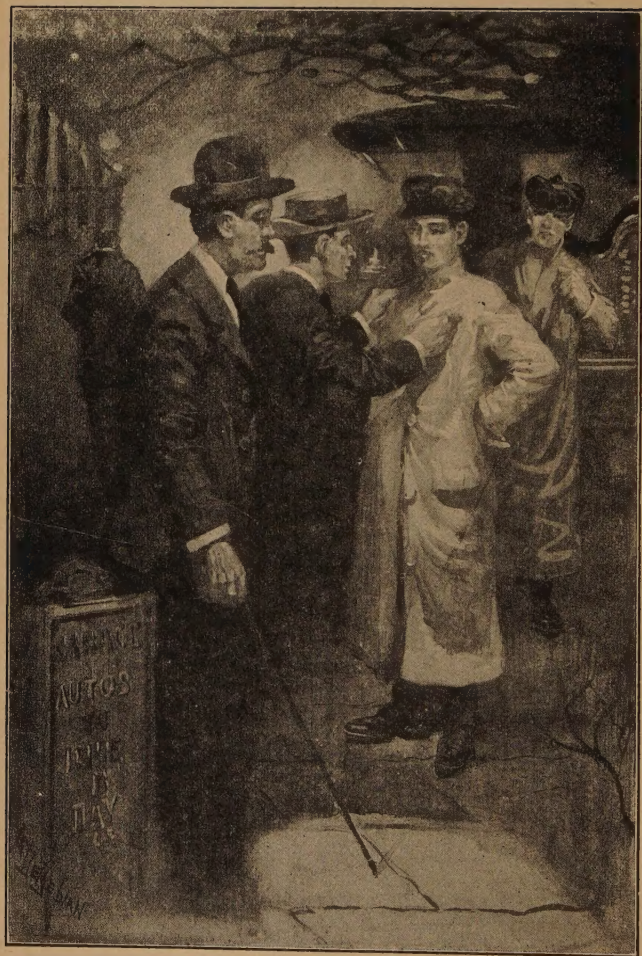


The AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

By
Jas. A. Braden



CHS - (129) E



“Not a word, mind you, to anybody about this trip.”

THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

By JAMES A. BRADEN

AUTHOR OF

"THE AUTO BOYS," "THE AUTO BOYS' OUTING," "THE
AUTO BOYS' VACATION," "THE AUTO
BOYS' RACE," ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY
ARTHUR DEBEBIAN



THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY
CHICAGO AKRON, OHIO NEW YORK

Copyright, 1908
By
The Saalfield Publishing Company

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I ON THE LEADER'S STAFF	1
II FOLLOWING A CLUE	17
III MORE CLUES	27
IV OFF FOR ORANGE	33
V SPINDLE MAKES UP HIS MIND	48
VI FURTHER CLUES	55
VII MAKING A MAN OUT OF A WATCHMAN	61
VIII THE TRAP ON THE NORTH SHORE	75
IX A RAPID RUN TO STAR LAKE AND THE RESULT	92
X A FRUITLESS SEARCH	107
XI HELPING TYLER GLEASON	124
XII A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER	140
XIII BAWLED OUT FOR FAIR	153
XIV DARK CLOUDS ON THE AUTO BOYS' HORI- ZON	169
XV A DISCOVERY AT THE OLD HUT	184
XVI 'MID WIND AND RAIN	199
XVII "THE END OF THE STRING, AT LAST"	214

THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

ON THE LEADER'S STAFF

To state that Con Cecil was exhilarated by the prospect of making a "ten strike" upon his first venture was, as has already been stated, putting it mildly. Here he was at last on the *Westerfield Leader*, a large city paper, having jumped at one leap from a provincial news sheet in the much smaller town of Lannington.

"Well, here goes for a real time at last," he reflected as he left the *Leader's* offices after his exciting interview with Frank Hardin, the city editor. "What will I do first? Better get in touch with some one that knows this lawyer Sacker, I guess."

It was a mystery with which Sacker was con-

2 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

nected that had opened the way for Cecil with the *Leader*.

In accord with this Cecil soon found out where Sacker lived, and had the man himself pointed out by a policeman on the corner near where Sacker resided. The officer looked at Cecil inquiringly.

"Stranger here?" asked the patrolman.

"In a way, yes. I've been here before, but only on occasional visits. You see I'm a newspaper man. Always anxious for something new to print—see?"

The officer regarded Con rather suspiciously, twirling his club. Finally he said:

"Reporter, eh?" Cecil nodded. "What paper are you connected with?"

"Well, you know it isn't always wise to let out too much at first, even to the police. However, officer, I'm here to stay, I guess."

"And you are on—well, what paper are you on, anyhow?" The policeman grinned amiably. "You can't expect much from us unless we know who we're talking to, can you?"

"That depends, my friend." Just then Con saw a tall, elderly man emerging from a showy residence near by. The officer, seeing this, suddenly restored his club to its sheath and hastened to meet the tall man who, rather flashily garbed, though not in bad taste, was about to cross the street at a point that would bring him and the officer together. Cecil remained, curious to see more, yet seemingly absorbed in something else in a different direction.

He saw the officer respectfully raise two fingers to his helmet, and knew that the tall man, smiling, said something in a low voice, whereat the officer laughed ingratiatingly. Then the two moved off down the street together to a corner, thus giving Con a good view of both. At first Cecil divined that they would meet him in passing, but the stranger signalled an approaching car and swung on, while the officer turned back, once more twirling his omnipresent club.

"Some smart chap, that man you were speaking to," remarked Cecil casually as he approached the policeman again. "Who is he?"

4 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

"Mean to say you don't know Judge Sacker, the eminent lawyer?"

For once the guardian of the law was surprised into a hasty admission. Cecil instantly caught on, and made the most of the admission.

"Well, you see I've only been here very recently. So that is John Sacker, eh? What was he—a judge?"

"We-ell, so it's said." The officer admitted by his surprise that the query was a poser. "Anyhow, he is said to have had a big practice, and now engages only in certain matters that best suit his—his convenience. He's already made enough dough, you see. But he certainly stands in with the best people. But—what makes you so curious about Sacker, anyway?"

He eyed Con suspiciously. Cecil took another angle.

"Good gracious, officer! Can't a newspaper man naturally be anxious to know about the big folks in a city like this? You see, I want to write up this burgh. It's all grist that comes to

my mill here." Then, with a sudden twist, as if of interest: "And yonder is Sacker's home—eh? Well, he certainly houses himself well!"

"Yes, yonder is his home; his offices are near the court-house. He's a good liver, does as he pleases, and is an all-round good sport."

Con saw the policeman was wearying of him. They were passing a cigar and news stand. It gave the lad a further idea.

"Come in! Have a cigar on me. Then, if you want to shake yours truly, I'll be off."

So cordial was Con's now ingratiating manner that the man surrendered again. The two entered the little corner stand, and while idly smoking, the policeman, in the same casual, off-hand way was slyly inveigled into telling what he knew about Sacker; how popular he was; how he stood in with the force, from the chief on down; how close he was to the grafting politicians then in power in that city. One thing, though, Cecil could not extract. This was any

6 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

definite details of what his present law practice consisted. He was often absent on important matters, either legal or about varied investments, in which he was mysteriously interested. Only within the last few weeks he had been away almost continuously in the neighborhood of Lannington.

At this Con pricked up his ears. But he only commented:

"Yes, I know that one-horse town. Used to live there."

"Did, eh?" The officer looked interested as he lazily puffed at his cigar and twirled his club, for the two were now on the street again. "Sacker has some nephews down that way, I hear. Rousy boys, good spenders; I guess they help the old man to get rid of some of his surplus cash."

"I've heard of 'em," rejoined Con boldly.

"Say—you!" called Chase, beckoning to a stranger who paused obediently, blinking a good deal. "Where you been? Just back from Orange?"

Con, though outwardly indifferent, listened intently to what followed.

"Yep, Mr. Chase! Left there yestiddy. Glad to be out of it."

"Out of what? Where's Bob Rydick?"

Con felt a curious thrill at the sound of that name, which he had heard more than once, mostly in connection with the Sagger nephews near Lannington.

"Well, things down in Orange is worked up over the way that game was worked on a farmer there called Spindle. Me, bein' a stranger and lookin' for—work, I 'lowed they'd get onto me in some way. As for Rydick, he'd already gone. Said he had a wire: said he had more business to 'tend to."

"There's something queer about that Rydick," said Chase. "What does he do, anyhow? He dresses shabby, he looks mostly like a whipped dog, yet he's nearly always on the go. That chap ought to be watched. Why, one night not so long ago, I saw him sneaking round the back of Judge Sacker's premises.

8 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

I'd 'a' put him under arrest then and there but Sacker himself came out just then and called me off to mail a letter. I often do things for Sacker; he's always so thick with the big ones up at headquarters. When I looked back at the corner Rydick was hiking off and Sacker, after lighting a cigar, was returning to his house."

The squint-eyed man listened but made no remark. Chase apparently lost sight of what he had asked, and told the man to run on and keep out of mischief, whatever that might mean. Then he walked on, forgetting Cecil, and twirled his baton more majestically than before. This suited Con, feeling that having extracted what he could from the policeman, here was another good chance to try for some further clue as to matters in Orange.

Leaving the officer to follow his rounds, Cecil began to shadow the other man. Once the latter had placed a certain distance between himself and Officer Chase, he loitered along the

sidewalks rather aimlessly, yet seeking the poorer quarters of the city.

Cecil noticed that the man stopped mainly at restaurant windows, apparently regarding the appetizing features there on exhibition. All at once Con snapped his thumb and finger exultingly.

"I'll bet a cookie the fellow's hungry and hasn't the spongs," he concluded. "Wonder how I'll manage it?"

An idea came to him and he acted on it instantly, without giving himself time to think, for it appeared outrageously bold. Walking up to the derelict, he slapped him on the shoulder, saying boisterously:

"Hullo, Bill! Where'd you jump from? Come on in and have some eats with me! I'm bu'sting to talk to somebody!" All this rapidly, as the squint-eyed man nervously turned and stared at Con's youthful visage so amazedly that Cecil could hardly keep from laughing. But recollecting in time, he threw into his face

10 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

a look of dismay as he stepped back, adding:

"Pardon me, stranger! I must be growing blind. I took you for a chap I once knew. Being a stranger here and hungry, I thought what a blessing it would be to have some one to talk to. Say, if you're hungry, why not join me, anyhow? Will you?"

By this time the frowsy man had recovered his balance, and seeing the prospect good for a meal without cost to himself and being, as Con inferred, very hungry, he at once replied:

"I'll go you, sir! But it's only fair to say that I'm broke."

"Makes my invite all the better, don't it?"

The two sauntered inside the third-rate restaurant.

At one side was a long counter and high stools where many were served with hasty lunches when space at the tables was scarce. The squint-eyed man eyed the counter as if expecting that there was the place most proper to one of his sort. But Cecil led the way to one of the nearer tables.

"Well, bo," said the reporter briskly, "what will it be? Speak up; anything you want, my friend!"

With some hesitation the man suggested beef stew, with bread, perhaps coffee, and—and—but there he hesitated.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Con. "You don't know how to order. Suppose we have steak with potatoes, lots of bread and oleo—I mean butter, and coffee—lots! I'm hungry myself; aren't you?"

"Well—yes, I am. But I don't feel exactly right, havin' you take me up right off the street so—so—" And there he paused, for Con was giving the order to the soiled waiter.

It was round steaks for two, with the extras for two and so on. The waiter gone, Cecil eyed his *vis-a-vis* quizzically as he remarked:

"Now, where have I met you before? I can't recall it exactly. Ever been in Lannington?"

"Y-yes. I—I served a short term on the

12 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

road-working gang out there once. Now you sort o' know about what I am."

"Was it out on the road towards Star Lake?" queried Cecil, ignoring the self-implication.

"Think it must 'a' been. You see I'm a sort of hobo. Git work now and then but don't stay long anywhere."

In came the waiter with the orders poised high on a tarnished tray after the manner of his kind. Putting them down, he laid the pay checks down impartially in the center of the table, eyeing the hobo suspiciously the while, then stood waiting. Evidently he did not intend to take long chances regarding the pay. But his manner offended Cecil, who said brusquely:

"You need not wait. We'll pay at the desk."

"If you says so—all right," responded the waiter. "But him—" indicating the squint-eyed man, "he's been here before. Owes us yet for two coffees with doughnuts—sure!"

"How much for the two?" demanded Con, producing some loose change.

"Ten cents."

Instantly the waiter had the dime and Con waved a dismissing arm.

Meanwhile Con's *vis-a-vis*, who had begun to eat like one half famished, stopped, his food unchewed in his mouth and stared first at the waiter, then at his friend opposite. Yes, it must be a friend, or else why would Con act openly in this unprecedented way?

"Don't mind that fellow," said Cecil soothingly. "I've been hard up myself at times. What's a dime amount to, anyway?"

"S-sometimes it amounts to a good deal, especially when you haven't got it. I—I'm often that way myself."

Cecil, still with the change in his hand, inspected the checks, that called for twenty-five cents each. Without winking he shoved thirty-five cents at his *vis-a-vis*, saying diplomatically:

"Sometimes it makes a fellow feel better to be able to pay his checks himself. Just stick that extra dime in your pocket and meet Fatty,"

14 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

indicating the mass of feminine corpulence behind the corner desk, "with the price. How is that, old man? All right—eh?"

"You bet, sir! Only I don't see why it is that you take so much trouble over such a lookin' chap as me." He eyed the reporter with a wondering bewilderment that might have been pathetic had it not struck Con as rather funny. He grinned amusedly as he minced at his meal, drinking sparingly of his chicory made coffee.

"Well, I *do* want something, bo," he at length confided to the other. "I guess perhaps I have seen you at Lannington; might have been on the road. But that now is neither here nor there. Do you remember being spoken to by a bobby back yonder?" indicating by gesture the quarter where Cecil had talked with Patrolman Chase. The tramp nodded.

"He said something to you about your being just back from Orange, didn't he?"

The other again nodded, meanwhile eating ravenously. Cecil continued:

"And also about one Rydick. Ever hear of that name down in Lannington?"

"N-no; I think not. But I know a Bob Rydick—"

"Same one that was down in this Orange township that Chase buttonholed you about? You see, I was close by and I could not help listening."

"Yes, I guess so. Anyway, the Bob Rydick I mean was in Orange time I was. There's an old chap named Spindle there that has the rep of bein' a miser. Guess he is, if what they say is so."

"How do you know?" Cecil, seeing that the man had finished his steak and potatoes pushed his own plate across the small table, and took over the other's empty dishes to his own place, for he was anxious to hear more and wanted an excuse to remain longer.

The tramp smilingly began on this second relay as if he quite understood.

"Oh, it was generally known! I was doin' a few day's work in a field next door to where

16 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

Spindle lived, and I saw Rydick round there with Spindle a time or two. They was prog'in' round the place. Finally, one night, jest afore I come away from there I went back to where I'd been workin' to get my pipe I'd left.

"Passin' Spindle's house I seed a light. Bein' a hobo, I nat'ally was curious and looked in the winder. Spindle and two others was at a table playin' some kind of game—of—of kyards, I reckon."

"Yes—yes!" Cecil was leaning across the table, eagerly following the other's words when the other suddenly drew back, vague suspicion in his eyes.

CHAPTER II

FOLLOWING A CLUE

Noticing the man's sudden attitude, the reporter eyed him for a moment steadily, then broke into a low laugh, saying:

"Naturally you wonder why I am so curious about Rydick, about Spindle; and also why I am manifesting such a hospitable interest in you, a stranger. And yet you are not altogether a stranger for, as I said before, I have been hard up myself. Therefore I like to feel that when I meet another chap in that fix, he will soon know I am interested in him. Then I feed him. If I have an axe to grind, he can surely help me a little bit, can't he?"

The squint-eyed man grinned over this frank avowal, as he ate the remainder of the food Con had passed him.

"Guess you're near right," he replied.

18 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

"Near right? I'm *all* right, and don't you forget that, bo!"

When the stranger was comfortably stowing the two servings of pie on top of the steak and potatoes he resumed his story.

"It wasn't yet dark and I knowed 'twouldn't do for to be seen openly peepin' in, so I meandered by, and after findin' my pipe, I hung round in the field a spell. By the time I was passin' that winder ag'n, I saw money and what looked like checks or notes or drafts or something until my eyes popped and my mouth watered. How I wanted some of that money!"

"See anything of a tall, broad-shouldered chap with a long mustache, rather stylishly garbed in a gray suit, looking rather gay for a man of fifty or more?" Con was only casually curious.

"Yeh—I guess I did. But only for a minute, for just then he put on a long, shabby overcoat that changed him—well, you might say to nothin' at all. With that on he was jest like any one you'd meet most anywhere."

“Who were the other two? Spindle was one—eh?”

The other nodded as he finished the last of the pie. Then he added:

“That feller Rydick was the other, sort o’ droopy, like he was sick or had the blues. Of course the bills and drafts were swiped up, mostly by that chap you spoke of, the one in the long overcoat. I ’lowed it looked cur’ous, that coat, for the night was fine, and it was almost dark outside. But you never can tell about folks. I hung on a little longer. There was some writin’s passed ’twixt Spindle and Rydick—don’t know what they were.”

“What happened then? Did you go on?”

“No—I hung about, keepin’ out of sight. ’Twasn’t any of my business, but I guess the sight of that money made me more cur’ous. Folks had told me old Spindle would run further to catch a doller and squeeze it harder ’n any one else in Orange. Mebbe he would; but from the little of him I saw he looked powerful tickled ’bout something.”

By this time the two got up. Cecil bought a couple of stogies at the desk of the fat girl after they had paid the table checks and, handing one to the squint-eyed man, they lighted them and walked out. On the street the tramp made as if to go, but Cecil had by no means exhausted his own curiosity. He sauntered along with the fellow, who—well-fed now and with a smoke between his lips—was by no means loth to keep up the talk. All at once the man paused and pointed slyly at a figure turning the corner.

“There he goes!” he said.

“Who—where—oh! That’s Rydick, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. It’s the droopy chap all right. Where’s he goin’, d’you reckon?”

“I’m going to find out. Want to come along?”

“All right. Sure he’s the man you’re after?”

“He’s one of ’em.” Here Con clamped down on his informing tongue, for it was patent that

he had no assurance beyond the tramp's words, and that he might, if such a course proved financially advisable, turn as an informer to the other side. "Keep behind, bo. I'm doing this myself."

Obediently the other did so, being lured, no doubt, by the hope that if he was duly obedient Con might "come across" again.

With a caution and elusive persistence doubtless acquired by the exigencies of the newspaper habit, Cecil sauntered on after Rydick, keeping as much out of sight as possible.

Presently leaving the more prominent street, Rydick turned through a cross street that led to another wider one, which in turn passed a certain court or alleyway. At this alley, Rydick paused and looked swiftly back, whereat Cecil, being at another crossing, wheeled and crossed the street, feigning absorption in avoiding puddles from recent rains, yet keenly alive to the other's movements.

Suddenly Rydick started up the court, vanishing for a moment, during which the reporter

22 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

speeded up the opposite pavement, lest the one he was following should vanish before he could again be seen. Sure enough, when Con was where he might look up the alley, there was no Rydick in sight.

"Confound it!" he fumed. "What's become of him—ah!"

This last utterance was caused by the squint-eyed man, who had dodged into an area passage some distance behind Con making some kind of a gesture at Cecil that seemed to indicate for the latter to get out of sight.

"What in the mischief does he mean?" Con queried mentally, but obeying by darting into the convenient opening of a covered passage. As he did so another figure appeared following Rydick's route. The general aspect of this stranger indicated to Con that it might be—yes it was, sure enough.

"This is luck!" thought the reporter. "Unless Officer Chase was yarning, that must be Sacker himself."

The tall man passed on, taking the route

previously followed by Rydick, and thus informing the reporter how it was Rydick had so quickly vanished. For the tall man turned suddenly and entered what, from Con's position, looked as if it might have been a brick wall. But it was only another covered passage similar to that which had sheltered Cecil. Evidently there was an inner court somewhere. Instead of returning to the open, Cecil cautiously followed the passage to an elbow where the light became brighter as he emerged into another broader passage, now open above. He was somewhat surprised to see the squint-eyed man appear at the other end. A moment later he slyly beckoned to Cecil to come on.

“Say,” said the tramp in a low voice, “you’ve done me a good turn this mornin’. I’m goin’ to do you another. See yonder?” He pointed at a side door near a corner where a saloon or eating house abutted on a street. “You go round to the front and go in. Give the man there an order of some kind, whatever you want, then go back and take your seat next the back

24 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

wall. There's a run of glass sashes along that partition. You sit there and listen. I'll knock round. When you're through you might tell me what you heard, or you mightn't. Anyhow, if you think it's worth it, you might give me a half dollar. It'll help tide me over the next day or so. See?"

For an answer Cecil pulled out another quarter, handing it to the squint-eyed man, saying:

"All right, bo. If what you infer turns out well, there'll be a half added to this—see?"

The man grinned and pocketed the quarter, while Cecil walked swiftly to the street door and entered the place, which proved to be both a saloon and eating house, not an unusual combination at that time in many cities.

Giving an order for a cup of coffee and a sandwich, he picked up a paper lying on a table and sauntered slowly back to where a row of sashes ran across the rear partition—a thin board wall—and took his seat at a small table close by. The place at that hour was almost empty. The day being warm, the sashes were

drawn apart, letting light and air from one room to the other. Scarcely had he sat down than the sound of low voices came through the partially open partition.

"That sort of thing won't do," said one voice, rather a heavy one. "I've held on to you of late not because I wanted to make more by your way of operating, but out of a wish to keep you out of real mischief."

"What do you mean, Mr. Sacker—"

"Hush! How often must I tell you to drop my name at our meeting places?"

Con could not catch the next few words, for the man came up with his lunch, which he paid for without comment.

"Anything more, sir?" said the waiter. Cecil shook his head, and the man went off. As the reporter listened for more, making mere pretence at his lunch, the voices broke forth more loudly.

"What did you want to come to Spindle's for, sir? I could have managed that myself. Why, the town is full of gossip!"

"Yes, and if you had, Rydick, do you think I would have pocketed my share?"

"Mine was small enough, sir."

"It is all you are worth. I always have to do the planning. That in such a confidence game as the kind I play requires much adroitness and some brains."

"I suppose then that is the reason I only get five hundred out of Spindle, where you made twenty-five hundred—"

"Hush! Why name prices and figures?" Here a hand and arm came up and slid the sashes together above Con's head.

Nothing more after that, but Con had heard enough, more than enough, as it was. He rose and sauntered out. The squint-eyed man was waiting round the corner.

CHAPTER III

MORE CLUES

Without a word Con placed a silver half dollar in the man's hand.

"You're all right, sir. Thank ye very much. Mebbe before this is gone I can git another job of some kind."

"Well, I hope so. Where can I see you again should I need you at any time soon?"

The man threw out his arms in a gesture indicative of anywhere, saying:

"There's one advantage in being a hobo, sir. My time's my own. As long as I have a nickel left, I kin ginnerly be found at the Blue Sign," meaning a well-known resort in the poorer quarters of the city. "You might go there, and if I ain't round leave word with the dago what waits behind the lunch counter. Round there they call me Easy Blink. That's because my

28 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

eyes are queer. If I'm in town I'll be where you say."

"Well, hang round for a day or two. I don't promise, but I really might want you—down in Orange, you know."

"Bet your life, sir! You're one 'll do to tie to, sure!"

And as Cecil evinced his desire to be on his way, the fellow vanished round the corner. The reporter, considering the varied purport of what he had seen and heard, took his way back to the *Leader* office, where he was soon relating to Mr. Hardin a succinct account of what he had already learned as to Sacker's connection with the Spindle game.

"You've done well, Cecil. That is, so far as you've gone. This tramp Easy, better keep in touch with him. He may be of assistance down in Orange. Take notes as you go along on all essential points. But meantime I'll give you a pass on the W & L trolley line. It goes through Orange."

"Am I to go down there now?" queried Con.

THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE 29

“Not for a day or so, I guess. I want you to go down to the city hall first. You must get acquainted with some of the big guns there—some of them big mainly in their own estimation. Here’s a note to the mayor’s secretary; nice young chap.”

Cecil had a shave, a wash-up, and something more to eat, then made his way towards the city hall. It is not our purpose to follow the young man upon his rounds of the afternoon. It is mainly to relate what he saw almost as soon as he arrived and presented his note of introduction to a trim, keen-eyed young man, Mr. Will Carlin, the mayor’s secretary. Already the mayor himself had left for the day. Con was cordially received and almost immediately introduced to a couple of city councilmen, also leaving the council chamber, for the day’s session was already over. The half open door disclosed several others inside, among whom was “Judge” Sacker, shaking hands with the group. Cecil, hardly surprised as yet, was rather taken aback when Carlin, saluting them, said:

30 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

"I want to present to you gentlemen a new man on the *Leader*. He's just in from Lan-nington—isn't that the place you hail from, Mr. Cecil?"

Cecil of course acknowledged the fact and returned the grips and salutations in kind. He noted then that at the mention, Sacker turned from a chat he was having with a councilman and glanced at Carlin, behind whom Con had stationed himself, for he vaguely felt that he did not want Sacker to see him distinctly. Merely the reportorial cautiousness, regarding the object of his present assignment. Besides, Hardin had advised him that it might be as well not to be personally known to Sacker, who just then walked off down the corridor leading to the street, apparently oblivious to any connection of Cecil with himself or any one else.

With apparent unconcern, Cecil also sauntered to the street and saw that Sacker was soon joined by a man whom Cecil already knew was at the head of a questionable banking house.

More out of curiosity than anything else he

saw the pair, after a brief call at the banker's office—then closed for the day, but reopened by means of a key—resume their way to a well-known eating resort. They entered and Cecil, feeling a bit hungry also, did likewise just in time to see the two go into one of a number of eating recesses where customers might eat in a certain degree of privacy. He accordingly took his seat at the end of the lunch counter near this booth, gave an order in a low tone, and sat listening.

Con sipped his coffee slowly. Finally the voices inside the booth rose somewhat. Now and then he could make out a word or so, but nothing coherent. Then came a sound as of some one counting, with a flap on the table as of bills and knuckles. At last one voice, rising louder, as if the owner was angry, blazed forth belligerently:

“You’re a cheat and a swindler, Sacker! Here’s your money! You didn’t earn it, not by a damn sight! But we have to cough up all the same.”

32 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

Cecil, having no further excuse for remaining, got down slowly, then sauntered aimlessly and by a roundabout way towards the paying counter. As he passed the booth, one end of which was open, he saw Sacker placing in his bill-book a sheaf of banknotes while the banker glared at him angrily.

It was no time to loiter, and Cecil passed on, having had one fleeting glimpse of the figure of the top banknote. It was for one hundred dollars. Fear that he might be seen made the reporter hasten, pay his trifling lunch bill and leave. Once outside he loitered until the two men came out, the banker first, looking straight ahead, saying nothing, while Sacker seemed to be talking propitiatingly but to no effect.

CHAPTER IV

OFF FOR ORANGE

In the morning, when Cecil reached the office, the city editor was not yet in. In fact Hardin was seldom at the office before noon.

Having made up his mind what to do next, Con went to the rendezvous appointed for meeting Easy Blink, but was informed that Easy was there earlier, had asked if any one had inquired for him, and had left word that if he was asked after again, to tell them to leave written word as to what, when and where Easy was wanted. He'd come sure.

Without saying more Con sat down at a table near and scribbled a note, saying:

“Friend Easy:—I have called but you are not here. Of course you could not hang round one place all the time, waiting on uncertainties. I am going to take the trolley for Orange. Better

34 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

come on after me. You know the place. I don't. But I will try as best I can to do that which carries me down there. If you should turn up, perhaps you might be of some help. However, do not bother if you happen to have something else on hand. Your friend, Anybody. P. S. I don't sign my name, because you don't know me that way."

This he sealed, gave to the bloated man, and left at once. Without much trouble he soon found a car going through Orange township, and was presently spinning along the turnpike towards that rural section. Near the end of the journey the car stopped at a corner roadside store, with a sign over the door announcing that here was the post-office.

As the car would wait five minutes before proceeding, Con went inside and instantly had the surprise of his life. Who should he see perched on the counter but Will Carlin, the mayor's secretary, flirting with the girl in attendance on the store.

When the young man saw Cecil, he jumped

down, smiled, looked his astonishment, and waved a welcoming hand.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Who would have thought to see a newspaper man way down here? Let me introduce you to my lady acquaintance here. Miss—er—m-m—your name escapes me somehow."

"No wonder," returned the girl, smiling and te-he-heing after the manner of her kind. "You've been here nearly an hour and you never asked."

"That is another proof of the agreeable nature of my new acquaintance." Then, turning to Cecil, he shrugged his shoulders. "You see how it is, old man. I have the will but lack the ability." Turning to the girl again, "Surely miss, your name cannot be Brown, or Smith, or—or—" But the girl took it up gayly in an instant, interposing with:

"No, sir. Or Jones, or Robinson—or—or—"

Here the store and post-office door opened again, and there entered a slovenly garbed man with round shoulders, a hooked nose and watery

36 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

gray eyes that appeared to be trying to meet each other over a big, flat nose.

"Evenin', Miss Feeney," he said and set down a small basket of eggs on the counter. "Where might your father be?"

While the girl, who had a sort of Irish prettiness about her, turned from her joking ways with these suave city young men with evident distaste, Carlin, winking at Con, remarked in her ear:

"Now we know, Miss Feeney—and we're happy."

"Why? Because I don't happen to know either of your names? You just wait until I get through with Mr. Spindle here, and I'll get even."

"Not with me, I hope," ventured Cecil, now thrilling with the notion that probably here was the very man whom he had come so far to see. "But I'm really pleased to meet you."

Carlin having retired baffled but chuckling to himself, Miss Feeney and Spindle soon completed the egg transaction, while he received

groceries in exchange. Meantime Cecil lightly accosted Carlin with:

"I hardly expected to meet you down here. Own up—was it the girl?"

Carlin winked, and slyly nudged Miss Feeney, who took it quite as a compliment as she continued waiting on the impatient Spindle. At last he turned on the youth peevishly with:

"Git outen my way, Bill! Next time I see your dad, I'm goin' to give him a piece of my mind, raisin' his boy to be a politician. They're all no good, once they fairly git in the game. Look how they did me!"

"Did the politicians do you, Spindle?"

Thereupon Cecil, who now remained quiet, heard a revised version of the swindle that had been worked on him, concluding with:

"Hit was all through my meetin' that feller Rydick up at city hall, same place you're workin' at now. Naw, sir! I hain't got one bit a use fer them chaps you meet hangin' round Westerfield's city hall. Ef I'd 'a' steered clear

38 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

of it myself I wouldn't be three thousand dollars poorer to-day!"

Here Carlin appeared interested, saying:

"Father mentioned in a letter to me that it was twenty-five hundred."

"That's the news that fust got out. But 'twas three thousand. I been savin' hard for five year to make that thar wad—damn 'em!"

"Too bad, Spindle. All I can say is I'm sorry. There! Isn't that my car, Miss Feeney?" Carlin hurried to the front of the store and post office just as a gray car glided up to the store platform.

"Bye-bye, Miss Feeney. See you again!" He shook Cecil's hand, adding: "If I had known that you were running down here we might have come together. Call on my folks while you're here; they live a mile up the road."

Meantime Spindle, having had his needs attended to, including a huge plug of tobacco, cut himself a chew and, seated on an empty barrel, seemed to be disposed towards sociability.

Eyeing the girl behind the counter, he began with:

"Where's your dad, Nory?" The girl seemed to feign deafness; but he asked again.

"Where's old man Feeney, Nory?"

Nora, seeing she was in for it, answered shortly:

"I think he went out to Diston's with a—a—what you call it?"

"I—see. Old Ham Diston's again behind, 'long of his rent—eh?"

"Pardon me," Con turned to the girl, now replacing some goods on the shelves, "but is your father a peace officer, as well as postmaster?"

"Oh, yes. He's district constable, if that's what you mean."

"And a good one, too, if I say it," interposed Spindle. "Pat Feeney knows what he's about, don't he, Nory?"

The girl nodded, not much impressed. Instead, she turned to Cecil.

"Say," she began, "do you really know Will Carlin? He seems to know you all right. And

40 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

—and I like him.” A blush followed this frank avowal.

“So do I, what little I’ve seen of him. I didn’t know he lived down this way.”

“His folks do, but he doesn’t,” remarked Spindle, with a long squirt of tobacco juice at the stove. “His folks are all right. So’s he. But hit ain’t quite right when a boy leaves home and puts himself down on a level with that set up there.”

“You seem set against them, sir,” said Con suavely. “Did the politicians do you up in any way?”

“Done me outen three thousand—slick as grease.”

“Oh, I thought it was a sort of card swindle by a bunch of crooks.”

“Well, they was crooked all right. But who put ’em up to it? That gang at the court-house and the city hall was mixed in with it some way.”

“This seems to me rather a serious accusation

to make, sir, if you will permit me to express an opinion. Did not the people put them in office up there?"

"Only in a way. By jiminy! The people voted for a few of the leaders and put 'em thar, but what do some of them leaders do but collect round them a set as rotten as there is in the bad place."

"You may be right, Mr. Spindle. Cecil is my name, sir."

"And what you doin' down here? By your looks, I'd take it for about the last place a feller like you would be hunting for. Out to buy land, cattle and so on?"

"No, sir. I will be frank with you. I represent a paper in Westerfield, a paper that is quite as much opposed to many of the ways now rampant at city hall as you can possibly be. Please believe that, won't you?"

"Reckon I'll have to, bein' as I don't know no better. Goin' to be down here long, Mr.—er Cecil?"

"Hard to say just now. Probably for a day

42 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

or so. By the way, Mr. Spindle, you live alone, don't you?"

"Well, yas, reckon I do. Not countin' stock, chickens, hawgs and so on, I'm jest about by myself, 'ceptin' a little darkey boy what helps about chores and sech like. Why'd you ask?"

"You seem to be near here, and I need a quiet place. How would you like to take me in for a night or two? I won't be much trouble."

For a minute Spindle stared at the reporter. Then he shook his head.

"Things is too durned dirty round me for a man of your looks, I'm feared."

Yet it seemed to Cecil as if Spindle was not unfavorably impressed with the idea. Truth was, Spindle wanted to talk to some one. There was some argument, pro and con, then Cecil turned to Miss Feeney, saying:

"If you would permit, perhaps I might take my meals at your father's and sleep at Mr. Spindle's. We won't quarrel about the price—I'm game there."

This last because of an expression in Nora's

face indicating consternation, but really it was merely surprise, and presently gave way to a smile of pleasure. Finally she said:

“You come over to our house in time for supper. I’ll see father. He does about as I want him to do when the time comes. I’d have you sleep at our house, but we have no spare room. Our house is small and—”

“There, there, Nory!” This from Spindle, now anxious not to be robbed of having some one who knew the city hall ways to talk to at night. “Me and Jeff—that’s my darkey—we’ll fix up a bed for Mr. Cecil all right.”

And so the arrangement was made and later confirmed by Feeney himself when he came in. Shortly after that Con took his way outdoors and along the trolley track. Presently he saw a car coming, and was rather surprised to see Easy Blink hop down from the rear platform and approach, blinking his eyes and touching his hat. Easy had rather furbished himself up and looked almost genteel.

“That dago told me when I come up that there

44 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

was a letter. I knew soon as I saw it, 'twas from you. So I got a shave and—here I be!”

“That was prompt, to say the least. Did you find out anything more about Sacker after I left?”

“Nothin’ except that before he left on the train he had a rukus with a friend of his’n that I happen to know—sort of wildcat banker, you know.”

“Yes, they had a difference, owing to money, I think. How did you happen to know this banker chap?”

“Oh, I used to do jobs round his place at odd times. I saw him just afore he left and he give me this.”

This happened to be a five dollar bill. Cecil looked his astonishment.

Easy Blink grinned as he continued:

“When I read your note, sir, I knowed that if I come down here, as that banker wanted me to, I wouldn’t be no expense to you. And I might be of some service as well. You’ve been good to me when I was real hard up. If

I can do anything for ye, I'm on. At the same time this banker chap, he wants me to find out all I kin 'bout whether Sacker had anything to do with this Spindle matter. I 'lowed that was mainly what you was here for. Perhaps we kin help each other."

"Why, yes, Easy. Make yourself at home here. What I want to know is for the use of my paper. It will be published soon anyway. For I now think that John Sacker is, if anything, a bigger scoundrel than your banker chap. Not that I object to you and he being friendly. It's all in the game."

"Bully! You're the right sort. What you want me to do? I know a little place off the trolley here where they know me. If I offer them a mere mite of money they'll keep me all right. But I must git this bill changed somehow."

"I guess we can do that right here."

Promptly Cecil produced a few small bills, with some silver and the "fiver" changed ownership. After that, with a few more words as to

46 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

the manner of the two occasionally meeting again at odd times, they separated.

Turning, he resumed his stroll, taking a direction that soon led him to the crest of the gently rolling land that lay all round. At once he located where Spindle lived, and further to the left, but nearer to the little store, lay the cosy home of the Feeneys. By now it was nearly supper time, so Cecil turned that way and, passing the store, saw that Mr. Feeney was locking up preparatory to departing for his evening meal.

"Huh, here you are at last! Well, we'll go up to supper, if you like."

Without stating more than that the supper did full credit to Miss Nora's skill as a housekeeper, the meal was finished. After a short chat, Cecil came to the conclusion that it was high time to begin looking up his quarters for the night. Accordingly he soon set out for Spindle's homelier domicile. No one appeared to be about the front premises, so the reporter walked on towards the barns in the rear, where Spindle was

doing the last of the chores. Jeff, the darkey, was helping.

"Bless me, if I didn't forgit all about your room and bed! You, Jeff! You run back to the house and tidy up the spare room a bit. Put some clean sheets on the bed, sweep up a bit. Hear me?"

"Yah, yah! I hears. I ain't plum deaf."

Following Spindle about the premises while the old man completed the chores, Cecil was forced to the conclusion that if Spindle was recently well enough off to be able to lose three thousand dollars, there was not much outward evidence of that fact visible to the casual outsider.

The stock consisted of a cow or two, a span of lean horses, several lean hogs in a pen, and some poultry straggling about the back yard and stables. All the buildings seemed to be in a neglected, almost tumble-down condition.

This had no effect on Spindle himself as he finally led the way to the back door of the dwelling, leading his visitor through a sloppy passage into a straggly, untidy sitting-room.

CHAPTER V

SPINDLE MAKES UP HIS MIND

"Got your pipe with you?" was old Spindle's first remark when the two sat down by the feeble wood fire in the battered fireplace, at the same time producing a black corn-cob pipe and a twist of home cured tobacco.

"No; I have something better." Con produced a couple of fat cigars, one of which he offered Spindle, who took it gingerly.

"'Scuse me," said the farmer. "I'm so wedded to my old pipe I seldom smoke 'ceptin' it goes through the same old mill."

So saying, he broke the cigar in two, crumpled half of it fine between his two unclean palms and stuffed the remains into his pipe, pocketing the homemade twist at the same time. While Cecil lighted his with a match, Spindle took an ember from the coals, balanced it on his pipe

and managed to light the pipe by vigorously puffing.

Finally the talk naturally veered round to what mainly interested both, the tale of the swindle, which Spindle expatiated upon with prolix and wearisome reiteration. Cecil listened intently.

It appeared that the main stake, according to Spindle, was a farm in the neighborhood, well stocked, that Spindle knew well, though the ownership was always a mystery, or to Spindle, at any rate. This farm was owned by Rydick, or so it appeared from the papers that had been shown Spindle at various times.

"We'd struck up acquaintance a time or two before. Me and Rydick often played kyards, a time or two at Westerfield where I fust met him. The old rogue was powerful sly. I didn't even 'spicion him."

"How did you first happen to meet him?" queried Cecil, beginning to take a lively interest. "Did Rydick come at you in the usual confidence way?"

50 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

"Naw—not at all! I seen him fust in a saloon. We had drinks and eats together. Always he would do the payin'. I reckon that was what fust got me to favor him. Then he come down here and looked about, talkin' of that farm of his'n. I knowed the farm and knowed the folks livin' on it was renters. They paid the rents in money to a banker chap in Westerfield.

"I'm not much on legal ways, but the way they put it up to me, it looked like a fair gamblin' chance. There was that farm; wuth six thousand at least; and me puttin' up only three thousand. I 'lowed I was then up in all the crooks and turns of the kyards. There was me, Rydick, and the feller that came down with him more than once. He, too, took a money chance. Thar was the money, his'n and mine. Thar was Rydick with the deeds of the farm. We threw and—by gum!—that feller—what was his name?—Daggers or Blaggers, I forgit which—"

"Perhaps it was Saggors," interpolated Cecil.

"Mebbe you're right—I dunno," said Spindle to whom the name spoken by Cecil conveyed no ominous hint. "Anyway, after we'd throwed three times, and all accordin' to the dice which this feller Saggors or Raggors shook, the kyards on the last throw came out all wrong. Me and that chap Rydick had lost. 'Tother feller won.

"After that everything got all sort of mixed in my head. I only know that this chap had the money and the farm. Me and Rydick had nothin'. When I finally got up, half blind with something in my eyes, for I was truly blind mad—crazy—'tother chap had gone. Thar was me and Rydick alone. Well, sir, he appeared all broke up, too. We sot thar and swore and choused about fer a time.

"Then I got sorter disgusted at myself. I don't 'member much when Rydick left; but I do know I didn't sleep much that night nor for

52 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

two or three nights after. I reckon I'm a born fool—don't you?"

"At any rate you were the only fool there that night; and I'll prove it to you. Perhaps Rydick was another, only in a different way. It was a cooked up game between those two and that fake banker up in Westerfield. I know. I can't prove it all yet, but with your assistance down here I soon will."

"What d'ye mean? I'm wuss turned round than ever."

"I mean this, my friend. That man Saggors, who left first, fooled you from the start. Rydick is his tool and has been for years. If the farm belongs to any one of that three, it belongs to Saggors, or Sacker—see?"

"You mean Sacker, the lawyer?" Spindle's eyes were like saucers.

"I mean Sacker, who pretends to be a lawyer, but who is not only a swindler but a prince among swindlers. Why, that three thousand he got off you was only a mere bagatelle to what he has gotten from others. But to get him

where he is, we've got to prove up as we go along. We've got Rydick pretty well spotted as Sacker's main assistant."

Spindle, more bewildered than ever, leaned back, his pipe unlighted, and rubbed his hand over his eyes.

"I guess I'm a dumb fool," he groaned at length. "It beats my time!"

"You will see it all plain enough in a few days. But you will have to help us in one thing."

"Who d'ye mean by us?" demanded Spindle, again slightly suspicious.

"You would know Sagger or Sacker if you were to see him again, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, bet your life I would! If I could git my fingers on him or that Rydick again, I'd—I—" He clutched at the empty air as if he felt himself at the throats of those who had swindled him so boldly, so brazenly, and had gotten away with his precious three thousand dollars.

"Don't worry, Mr. Spindle. I think you will

54 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

get your money back eventually. It may take some time.

"I have an assistant down here now. He's a sort of hobo, but he is honest, at least in small matters. I've proved him so. He passed your windows that night you, Rydick and Sagger were in that three card game. He saw Sagger stuffing your money in his pocket. He will find out a few more things here, for I've got to go up to my paper to-morrow. What you've told me clinches what I suspected before. All that remains is that I want you, when I come down again, to be ready to go with me to Lannington or possibly Star Lake in order to see if you know a man there whom I will show you. You will go in some sort of disguise, perhaps as a workman or something. What I want now is for you to be sure and promise me before I go to-morrow that you will do this."

"I will—by gum! You can count on me," he replied.

"And you, too, can count on me."

CHAPTER VI

FURTHER CLUES

When Cecil laid before Hardin the facts and their accompanying proofs which his visit with Spindle had revealed, the city editor was pleased. He did not manifest this very openly, for discretion more than effusion is required at the city desk.

"I guess you'll do, young man," he finally owned. "Just keep on at this affair until you have the facts nailed down hard enough so far as the *Leader* is concerned. It won't do you any harm either."

After a lengthy consultation about the general run of things, Cecil concluded that he would drop round at the banking office upon some fictitious errand. Having thought of a pretext, he was about to enter when who should appear down the street but Rydick.

The man stopped at the entrance, looked right

and left, then disappeared inside. A moment later Cecil followed, entering a rather shabby interior.

Cecil boldly asked to see the proprietor, but the clerk shook his head. The boss was busy, couldn't be seen; would the gentleman state his business? Cecil quickly presented some excuse as to why he wished to interview the "boss" but with small result.

"All right," said he. "Then I'll wait a bit, if you don't mind." He seated himself on a settee, near where the corridor ended in a closed door.

Meantime the reporter wondered why a man like Rydick could vanish so suddenly, supposedly into the private office, while he was apparently bluffed from an interview with the powers that be inside this domicile. While pondering this and scrutinizing the area behind the shabby glass partitions that evinced but little of the neatness and order usually prevailing in banking offices, the door at the rear opened.

Then Rydick appeared, a scared expression on his untidy features, and with a sudden movement as if he had been pushed out. At the same time a sharp voice in staccato tones was heard:

"You have been told not to come here again. It won't do, I tell you! Now go—and go quickly!"

The door closed hard, shoving Rydick out with it. Cecil heard a low snicker among the clerks. Rydick blundered to the front door somehow and vanished. The reporter debated as to whether he should attempt to enter, but concluded not to.

"After all," he thought, "there is nothing I can say to him that would not arouse suspicions of some kind. Men in his place are always suspicious. I have seen what I came here for: that this is not much of a real banking house, but more of a fake. If they were wise they would clean up a bit more."

On his way out the clerk who had spoken looked at his mate and said carelessly as if he did not mind being heard:

58 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

"Reckon the boss hasn't much use for callers this morning."

As Cecil walked along towards his boarding-house, he saw a rather familiar face slip by as its owner bent over the wheel of a big touring car.

"I ought to know that face," he listlessly reflected. Then all at once it came to him; he knew. It was Wilder of Knight and Wilder's garage in Lannington.

"Why, hullo, Wilder!" he called out as the car glided on at municipal regulation speed. "In a hurry?"

Wilder turned, still crouching at the wheel, and nodded. Then his voice came back on the breeze.

"Hullo! Can't stop. Got to make that north train." And the car drew on, turning into a boulevard that Cecil knew led to a depot on the further edge of the city. This turned the reporter's thoughts in another direction.

The Auto Boys! How were they coming on? How would they take the letter he had recently

sent them? For a time, they had been unable to raise the means to pay for the "Thirty." How had they all at once come into its full possession, and from what he had heard, run an auto line to Star Lake?

Con liked the Auto Boys. He wanted to help them. The only manner wherein he had seen a present way was to assure them ambiguously through the letter that he was their friend, come what might; that nothing would induce him to acknowledge a suspicion that might militate against them in any way. He knew no more than what he wanted to know—nothing.

And yet an uneasy feeling somehow possessed him whenever he soberly thought of those lads and their affairs.

"I like those lads: I can't help liking them. Who wouldn't like them, knowing their general ways and doings? If by any chance they were suddenly tempted upon the wrong road—well, didn't Binski owe them and wouldn't pay? He could have paid them if he would. Then what? Does that justify these kids in doing what I'm

60 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

mightily afraid they've been tempted to do? Not much! And yet it sort of mollifies the thing. I can't tell exactly how; but it does. That is, if they really *did* do what some folks think they might have done. Heigho! I like to think well of friends—true friends. And I'm—I'm not going to help on these wild evil rumors—not much! I don't know anything, and what's more, I don't *want* to know anything!"

CHAPTER VII

MAKING A MAN OUT OF A WATCHMAN

It so happened that very night, after Con had eaten his supper, who should he meet but Will Carlin, and the two, now feeling quite a mutual interest in each other, strolled down one of the main streets of the town, finally reaching one of the clubrooms of the city, at which Carlin stopped, saying:

“Suppose you run in here with me a bit. I belong to this club, and as a newspaper man you may meet some more of our big men who dabble more or less in city politics. Always best for you chaps to get on the inside as much as you can. It’s a good plan to know and be known by the right sort of folks.”

“I guess you’re right. Later when things move round handy I’ll try to get myself put up for a membership.”

62 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

They sauntered into the clubhouse which was spacious, comfortable and even luxurious in its varied appointments. Business men, politicians, professional men and even some of the clergy were on the membership roll. Carlin was enthusiastic in its praise.

"If a man wants to know things about what's going on here in Westerfield, I know of few surer points of advantage than to have the entrée of the All-Round Club. There are other clubs of course, devoted to sports, athletics, social specialties and so on. But the All-Round for me. Outside of city hall, it's the spot to get onto things, believe me!"

"I see Hardin's name," remarked Cecil as the two stood at the desk and turned the pages of the big book classifying the varied pursuits of those who claimed membership. "He's my immediate superior in the office. Guess I'll join a little later."

"Good thing to do. Meanwhile you must let me put you up as a guest for a few days. Then you'll have the entrée—see?"

"It's really very kind of you, Carlin. I really appreciate the courtesies you have shown me during my short stay here."

"Oh, that's as it should be. When I like a young fellow I try to show it."

And so it came about that Cecil was made a guest of the club, with the hope of soon joining. When it came to looking through the list, the reporter saw that Sacker's name was on. This led to further conversation and Carlin remarked that Sacker seldom came—doubtless too busy.

"Yes, I have already suspected that," Cecil remarked, being determined now to take Carlin into his confidence so far as the progress of events justified such a course.

"Too busy," he added. "What's he too busy about?"

"Ask some one who knows. As for me, I think that his affairs are mostly made of bluff and audacity. I don't take much stock in the man."

With this as an opening, Cecil presently confided in the secretary to the extent of making

plain that one of the reporter's present duties was to look into certain matters in and about the city hall, and that he more than suspected Sacker to be hand-in-glove with some of the more disreputable men who were always around these political haunts, especially where money was to be given out in return for supplies and other things which the city was continually in need of.

"In short, you mean graft and all that goes with it." Carlin spoke sneeringly. "Let me give you the names of a few of these grafters with whom Sacker is on specially good or bad terms, supposably as the results of certain sub-rosa deals of varied kinds."

As this matter only lightly concerns the nature of a narrative like ours, we may skip much of what passed. But in the course of his companionship with the mayor's secretary Cecil came into more or less contact with some of these men, contractors they called themselves, and thus learned much of their ways, and also their opinions of Sacker and Sacker's minions,

of whom Rydick came in for censure, mostly as tool—and a tool but poorly paid.

After a few days the reporter stumbled upon one transaction where, at the expense of a supposed confederate, Sacker had bled the city out of a snug sum, in supposed payment for the repair of the city's main reservoir. Carlin first put him onto this.

To ensure their knowledge one evening, Cecil took Carlin out to the reservoir itself, where one of the watchmen showed himself to be approachable, if a "fiver" was to be his reward, though of course nothing must be said.

"I ain't much," said this guardian of the city's source of water supply, "but I can't help seein' things and formin' my own opinions."

It appeared that for several thousand dollars a measure was wheedled through the city council only a month before, to patch with concrete a certain part of the dam, in an out-of-the-way corner.

"What d'ye think?" said this man. "There wasn't no break there at all! Not even a crack;

though it was made to appear so on the face. For why do I know? Because I was the chap what was hired to kind of paint on the dam what would look like a crack from this walk where we now stand. Damn 'f I didn't paint it on! There was a committee of two. Monagan and Sacker; I 'member the names. Monagan was there on the part of the council that had granted the contract. Sacker—he's a big man in the city—he was there for the bidders. Thousands was in it—I know. All I was to git was—well, I won't tell how much. But it was little enough. The thing was gone through with. I saw it all. The carts with concrete and stuff dumped their loads, all paid for by the city. For two nights other carts come in the dark and took most all of it away. Where to? I dunno, but I'd make a bet it went back to the chaps that sold it to the city. When the time come, they had me again to paint the crack out, so that the wall looks good, as you gents can see now."

Cecil's pulses were already racing. Half unexpectedly he felt sure that he, with Carlin for

evidence, had stumbled on another big thing. But another query came to him as he paid the "fiver."

"How is it, my friend, that you are so frank with us here, who are strangers to you?"

"Well, I'll tell you. When all this comes out I'll lose my job. They 'spicion me anyhow. They wouldn't give me but half what they'd agreed to pay, and said it was more'n what a ten minute job of paintin' was wuth. Meanwhile they had got their money from the city. Monagan seen to that. They'd divvied with all the important ones who, like me, had helped on the deal. And, I reckon, for I can't prove that, they had got back all the concrete and stuff they had sold—lots of it, you bet!"

The thing looked appalling; it was so big, so convincing, and—in many respects—so easy, to those on the inside. All at once Carlin remembered where he had seen the man. As he did so he came forward and offered his hand, saying:

"My dear fellow, shake! I remember you

68 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

now. Strange I didn't do so before. But I meet so many people."

"Yes, I knowed ye, sir." The watchman appeared to be gratified. "You're the mayor's secretary, ain't ye?"

"Yes, I am. But I was a newspaper man like my friend here, and I'm going back to the game soon. How is your little girl, Cramer?"

"By jinks, he knows my name!" exclaimed the watchman, more gratified than ever. "Yes, sir! But for you I'd 'a' lost that gal. Sure I would!"

"Here is material for another story," Cecil broke forth laughingly. "You're not a doctor, too, are you?"

Carlin laughed, shook his head and seemed to enjoy the situation greatly, as he turned to Cramer again.

"You have not yet told me how that pretty little daughter is."

"Oh, she's all right! At least she was when I saw her startin' off to school this morning. "But," here he turned to Cecil, "she wouldn't

'a' been if he," pointing at Carlin, "hadn't 'a' jumped in this very reservoir after her when she fell in off that dam—right there."

He pointed a long finger at the freshly smeared place on the dam they had been looking at, which was made to simulate new concrete as much as mere paint could do.

"I was down at the bottom of the wall on this side, beginning my fake work to make the dam look like it had been mended. My little girl was playing by herself up there," he pointed to the top of the dam. "She was waiting for me to come back to her in half an hour or so.

"I sort of heard a faint splash, and I looked up. Thar was a man running at top speed along the dam. I still 'spicioned nothing. Then I heard him call out, 'Keep up, keep up, little one! I'm comin'!' Still, like a fool, I never thought of what was happenin', though I was somehow uneasy. I dropped my brush and paint pot, meanin' to go up and see what was up. Then I heard a thunderin' big splash in the water way above, and I knowed something was

70 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

wrong. You bet something *was* wrong; and by that time, if it had depended on me, that something would never have been righted.

"Up, up I climbed along that ladder." He pointed at one of the stationary steel ladders that at stated intervals were strung from top to bottom of the massive concrete wall. "When I got there, the fust thing I saw was this gentleman's head at the edge inside the dam, and he trying to put something on the flat surface of the top. I was breathing hard, but I managed to get there in time to help him up. For there lay my little girl, apparently dead, and he just as wet as she was, but even more alive than I was.

"Before I could bat my eye he was down on his knees, doing things to her to bring her to, which he did in short order. By that time I managed to gulp out some words, I dunno what they were, but he interrupted, orderin' me to get his friend Dr. Smythe down by the tower yonder," pointing at a small tower at the far end of the dam where the sluices were.

“ ‘Run, run!’ says he. ‘We need him!’

“Well, I managed to hurry and get this doctor man in three shakes of a lamb’s tail, and betwixt ’em they fetched my little girl round all right. But it was a mighty narrow squeak, I tell you!”

He turned to Carlin and held out his hand which the young secretary grasped heartily. Then the man turned to Carlin, saying sheepishly:

“D’ye know, sir, that day you saved not only her life, but you’ve practically saved mine. It set me thinking, sir. That day I was a rascal,—that is, a small rascal. But I made up my mind that I would not be a rascal, or fill a rascal’s place any longer’n I could help. And I hain’t been, either.”

“Just what do you mean by that, Cramer?”

“I dursn’t split openly on them men, but I sent back their money, ’thout their knowing it was me. And I applied through the mayor for a transfer.”

“Yes, I remember, Cramer. The mayor was

72 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

dubious at first, but I got him to consent. The mayor is honorable; but from his position he doesn't know many things. I recognized you to-day but couldn't place you at first."

"I knowed you, sir, at first jump. When you and this man came here this morning, I says to myself, 'Now is your time to get square. To-morrow you'll be transferred over to the waterworks. It's your last chance,' I says to myself.

"What I've said to you two to-day is all true as gospel. You can make any use of it you think best. I'll stand up to it if it loses me my place yonder," pointing at the distant waterworks; "every time I look at my little girl I says there's various ways of bein' made honest. But if you want to turn a man inside out, 'thout his knowing it, jest do what Mr. Carlin did to my little girl. If he's got any honesty left in him after that, he'll be honest, and he'll stay so, I hope."

"I believe you, sir," remarked Cecil. "I did

not know all this of you, Carlin. Why, man, you're a hero!"

"Well, he can swim all right!" said the watchman. "He told me that day that the current—it sets in toward the sluices—had carried her fifty yards or so out from the dam. He just saw her skirts on the water, and he didn't wait for anything but to throw off his hat. Did it ruin your clothes, sir?"

"Oh, no," laughed Carlin. "But I was so wet that our cabman grumbled some because of the water that soaked his cushions. I had them cleaned and pressed."

After some more chat with the now repentant watchman, who insisted on accompanying them to the end of his beat, the two friends departed for the city.

"How did you happen to see the girl?" queried Cecil presently.

"I was shying some pebbles over the water, waiting for Dr. Smythe—you saw him at the Club. I saw that man leave his girl on the

dam, and knew she was rolling a hoop or something. When I looked that way again, the girl had disappeared. I ran forward, not comprehending yet fearful, when I saw her skirts way out in the water, and I knew what was up. In trying to stop her hoop, she had toppled at full speed into the water. The reservoir was as full as it is now. So I began calling loudly as I ran. Seeing no one, there was but one thing for me to do; and—I'm right glad I did it. If it has made an honest man of Cramer as well, so much the better."

"Say, Carlin," said Con, turning eagerly, "do you know all this would make a capital newspaper yarn?"

"Oh, it might do on a pinch. But if I know you, Cecil, you won't try it on me. There are reasons, you know."

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAP ON THE NORTH SHORE

A very thorough discussion of Billy Worth's adventure on the night trip to the Lake, and particularly the threats of the Star Lake club, took place in the garage under the elms the morning following those occurrences.

"Sam Carew's been hanging around with that Star Lake gang," announced Paul Jones in the midst of the conversation. "He's a fine young pup!"

"Telling 'em about the touring car his uncle in Chicago is going to send him, I suppose," said Phil, with one of his quiet smiles. "Sam will either fool them a lot or get fooled himself, all right."

"Oh, Sam thinks they're just the candy because they come from Westerfield. Let them believe half what Sam tells *them* and they'll

think he's the whole thing in this town. Good match, all around, I say," declared Paul.

"Like Sam's uncle in Chicago—just wind and bluff—on both sides," laughed Billy Worth. "But we don't need mind Sam nor the Star Lake club, either. I want to say again that those fellows will no more try to do anything worse than play dirty little tricks with the car, providing they get the chance, than they'll try to fly. They're long on talk from a distance, but it all ends there. They've made threats before. Whatever came of them? Not a blessed thing. No, sir! Except to look out for wire nails and glass and stuff in the road, we shouldn't pay the least attention to 'em. They won't dare scatter too much junk around, either, for fear their own tires may pick up some of it."

Dave MacLester was little inclined to agree with Billy's statement. His Scotch blood was up and he was just a trifle more disposed to look for trouble than to avoid it. Phil and Paul, however, sided with Worth. On account of the pleasant relations with Uncle Joe Brush

and all the guests and campers at the Lake, they hoped there would be no serious clash with the three cousins. If it came, they wouldn't run; they'd fight to the finish, fully realizing though they did, that any such affair must be more or less disgraceful to all concerned.

As the time for the morning trip to the Lake drew near, the talk changed to other subjects. Phil was to make the run this time, and the graceful Thirty moved off, under his now experienced hand, as lightly as a feather.

Scarcely was Phil gone when who should come strolling down the alley but the head of the Grand Syndicate, so lately under discussion, Sam Carew himself.

"Seems to me Phil Way gets more than his share of the Lake trips," he remarked jocularly. "Wouldn't stand for it."

"What's it to you?" demanded Paul Jones, bristling up like a porcupine.

"Nope; even Stephen all around," answered Billy Worth, more pleasantly. "Every man has his turn."

"You were out just last night, weren't you, Bill?" Sam asked, seating himself with the others in the doorway of the little garage.

"Yes, how did *you* know?" was the answer.

Sam hesitated. "Oh," he said, "I just thought—I thought I saw you coming in from that way."

"What time?" inquired Billy.

"Don't know, for the life of me. I was just rambling around and didn't pay any attention." Sam was so accustomed to lying that, once started, he spoke quite glibly.

"It was an extra trip," said Worth, having no reason for not offering the information.

"Well, I didn't mean anything when I said Phil got more than his share," Sam answered. "Just seemed as if he did. Whose turn next?"

"Dave goes this afternoon, Paul to-morrow morning and I to-morrow afternoon, unless there's a special in between," Billy replied. "Just as I told you, it's even Stephen in everything with our gang. Hear you're getting real

chummy with the Willie boys at the Lake, Sam; how about it?"

"They've been hanging around me some. Want me to go out to the Lake and stay with them. Gee! Their uncle's a swell! Rich as a mint, too!"

"As rich as your uncle in Chicago?" asked Dave MacLester, slyly.

"I reckon either one of 'em could buy up a whole Scotch colony if he wanted to," snapped Sam, referring, of course, to Dave's Scottish descent. Without another word he arose and walked away, moodily shuffling his feet through the dust.

The significance of Sam's unexpected call and the questions he asked went unnoticed by the Auto Boys at the time. Later they had occasion to remember them. They discovered Sam Carew in his true colors, liar, braggart and traitor that he was. If they had chanced to follow him this morning they would have found out his villainy earlier, though not more completely, than they did.

It was to a telephone station that Sam sulkily betook himself. He asked the operator for the Brush house at Star Lake. Martin Waldo was soon on the line, and Sam informed him that Billy Worth would make the regular auto trip to the Lake the following afternoon.

"Or," said he, "if their car is out on a special trip before that, Worth will be just so much earlier. You'll have to watch for any special, then. Oh, yes, sure I'll let you know anything I hear or can find out. I'll call up about tomorrow night, if I don't see you. I want to know what happens. I had a deuce of a time to find out when the one you want would be out there. No, I didn't hear them say a word about anything that happened last night. Oh, yes, sure! I hadn't heard a word, of course. They'd have got wise right off if they had known you'd been talking to me."

This was the substance of Sam's end of the conversation, and he hung up the telephone receiver.

Perhaps it should be said, to the credit of

his conscience, Sam felt guilty and mean; but in all probability Benedict Arnold felt the same. Who has ever known a traitor and a spy made happy by his infamy? But the shame and stinging remorse will always come too late. There is no step backward, to peace of mind again, after the folly is committed. And it was so in Sam's case. Not for many a day did he hear the last of his betrayal of a neighbor and a friend,—for Billy and he had always been on good terms and friendly, though in no sense chums.

Promptly on time Phil Way sounded the Thirty's horn, as he turned down the alley to drive into the garage. The other boys had been busy with various bits of work at Mr. Dilworth's and elsewhere during his absence, but before noon all were assembled once more beneath the elms. Phil's report was almost none at all. He had seen nothing of the Star Lake club, nor had he heard a word concerning the settlement Uncle Joe Brush would require of

those young gentlemen in behalf of the farmer whose colt was killed.

"There's a letter for you, Phil," called the maid from the kitchen window, as she noticed that he had returned.

"Much obliged, Julia, I'll get it pretty soon," the boy answered; but it chanced that he did not remember the subject again until the second day following.

Perhaps it was just as well. With all that happened, meanwhile, it were better, indeed, that Con Cecil's warning should for the time lie unopened in the library.

Paul returned from the regular run to the Lake the following morning with the information that the Star Lake club had been asked to pay sixty dollars for the killing of the farmer's colt. They would be allowed to obtain the money from their uncle presumably, and settle the matter quietly, or they would be placed under arrest and suit for damages brought besides. A promise to get the money at once had been made after much ugly conten-

tion on their part and so, it seemed, the incident would end.

Pete Whaley, otherwise "Buffalo Bill," etc., the colored boy, had given Paul the news of the adjustment of the damages. He had added as he did so: "You boys wants to keep yo' eyes peeled mighty sha'p fer dem rowdy cousins. Dey means ye ha'hm. 'Deed dey do!"

Paul repeated the young darkey's warning verbatim. "They haven't got me scared—not for a minute," said Billy Worth. But when the time for his trip to the Lake came, with the long afternoon wait there, before returning, Phil Way took him aside and earnestly cautioned him to be on his guard. He would be, and constantly, he said seriously. But whether he was or wasn't will soon be apparent.

Two passengers for the Lake were waiting for the Thirty that afternoon at the park entrance. Also waiting for the car was a rather seedy looking fellow who carried a small basket of groceries.

"How much to take this yere grub to the fur

side o' Star Lake?" he asked, as Billy stepped down to open the tonneau door.

"Who's it for?" was asked.

"Couple o' campers way on the fur side o' the Lake—the nort' side, up in the woods. Ye'll hev t' carry it clean back to their shack."

"A quarter to leave it at the hotel for them," said Worth.

"Naw, they won't have it that way," the fellow coarsely insisted. "Said I was to give ye one plunk to carry it back to their shack yerself an' say nothin' to nobody. Nawthin' to it but grub, but they said they was awful purtickler who comes there because they has their own place fer fishin' an' don't want none o' the hotel help or anybody spyin' on 'em."

"I'll take it," said Billy with business-like promptness. The basket was placed in the car and he pocketed the dollar. "All ready?" he asked, and in another moment the motor chugged its warning that the Star Lake Thirty was on the way.

It was an unusually warm afternoon but at

the request of the lady and gentleman in the tonneau Billy ran quite slowly. How he did long to speed up for just a little way and get the rush of cooling air! His passengers were always his first consideration, however, and the machine purred along gently as the summer day itself.

All was quiet about the Lake. A couple of guests at the hotel were playing tennis on the court at the north side of the lawn, but no one else was near.

Peter Whaley, otherwise Andrew Jackson, was dozing in the shade of a chestnut near the back door of the establishment. Billy noticed him as he ran on to the shed, after his passengers had alighted. He nodded familiarly to the colored boy and the latter responded with a lazy wave of the hand.

"Now then, little basket, we'll explore the north side of the Lake," said the custodian of that piece of express matter to himself, when he had shut down the engine and put the Thirty in proper order for his absence.

86 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

Glad to see nothing of the amiable cousins, Billy set out at once along the path which mounted the hill to the north and presently lost itself in the woods bordering the bluff above the water. He did not doubt his ability to find his way, even after the path was left behind. He had only to keep near the edge of the bluff that descended to the Lake. The shack of the two fishermen could not be more than a mile and a half distant, at most. Less than two miles would take him well into the meadows beyond the tree-skirted shore.

While the path remained, it was pleasant walking through the deep shade of the overhanging trees. As a denser portion of the woods was reached, however, the heat increased. The slight breeze did not penetrate the thick growth, and mosquitoes and gnats were unpleasantly numerous.

Thinking only of delivering the basket and finishing the task quickly, Billy steadily made his way forward. Once he thought he heard low voices near him and stopped to listen, hoping the

sounds came from the camp he expected soon to see. But he heard nothing while he paused excepting the snapping of a twig and the faint rustle of the leaves, so forward he went.

A little further on the boy came upon a somewhat open space, surrounded by a considerable growth of underbrush on all sides. The camp of the fishermen must be near at hand, he thought. He had left the hotel a mile behind, at least. As he listened for some possible sound to guide him, he heard suddenly a rapid rush of many feet upon the ground. The rending of low bushes and fallen branches as they gave way was as if a strong wind had come sweeping down. Before Billy Worth, wholly unsuspecting such a thing, half realized what was before him, the three young ruffians known as the Star Lake club had one and all leaped upon him.

In vain did the helpless boy resist. Taken by surprise, he was on the ground and his face pressed into the loose, black mold before he could raise a hand. Fiercely he struggled. The perspiration ran from every pore of his body

as he put forth repeated efforts to gain his feet. Once he managed to shoot a right fist swiftly upward and the burly Pitt Sagger tumbled backward with a bloody chin, but in another minute both Billy's feet and hands were tightly bound with baggage straps and he could only lie panting as he looked about him.

It was with the vilest of language that the three cousins had accompanied their cowardly attack, and now, as they stood back and looked upon the blood-stained face of their victim, they let loose oaths and epithets that none but the most degraded would ever utter.

"Where's the groceries?" demanded Jay Waldo, when he had quite wearied himself with his foul talk. He grinned maliciously as the slow and heavy Sagger, still rubbing his battered chin, gathered up the scattered contents of the basket.

"Biggest dollar's worth we ever got for *our* money," Martin Waldo put in with savage glee. "Best of it is that we made the little whelp bring along the very things for the sport."

“Here’s the salt, here’s the pepper! Smear that cut in his face with it. But hold on! Yank his clothes off! These mosquitoes can be getting in their work while we rest.”

“It’s a long lane!” exclaimed Billy Worth through his clinched teeth. They were the only words he spoke. He did not add “that has no turning” and so complete the phrase, but he thought it and he believed in its truth. He had the sense to know that he was overpowered; that speech from him would but add to the vicious delight of those who wished him to show suffering and fruitless rage. Grimly he bore the pain. In silence he endured the indignities to which he was subjected. He showed fight when the chance offered, but for the most part he was wholly helpless.

To name all the cowardly acts of the three youths, whose courage and manliness were of so small a calibre that they would seek to punish their enemy only when, three against one, they had bound him hand and foot, is neither necessary nor desirable. They were both mean

and hateful. The climax came however, when Jay Waldo dictated an abject apology to the Star Lake club, Martin writing his words in a pocket memo-book. When finished the apology, just as it was written, read:

“To the Gentlemen of the Star Lake club I make an appology of my Own free will, reckognising their excellents in everyway and feeling very sorry that I have Given them offents. I appologeys for speeking with out Being first spoaken two and I espechielly appolegeys for peeching to old man Brush and that farmer who kild the coalt and confess myself to be a meeslie snob when I did it.”

“Now, you little snitcher, you’ve got to put your name to this,” announced Jay Waldo, with the air of a tyrant king.

“I wouldn’t sign that, or anything else, for all three of you together—but the papers to hang you,” muttered the suffering boy with unyielding determination.

“Sign it, you sneaking rat,” growled Jay,

bringing his fist hard against Billy's head, just back of the right ear.

They had released the captive's right hand from the straps and the clumsy but muscular Sagger held the free arm as if in a vice.

"Sign it! sign that apology or we'll kill you! Sign it, you cur!" almost shrieked Martin Waldo, and he brought a small, sharp chestnut sprout down stingingly on Billy's bare back. "Sign it!"

But the next instant the scene was changed. Martin Waldo went sprawling in the brushes ten feet away. Pitt Sagger landed at full length on his back just where he stood, and Jay Waldo doubled up under the influence of a swifter jolt than his ribs had had in all his life.

Martin rolled over and over but made no effort to rise. Sagger grabbed for his handkerchief to wipe his bleeding nose. Jay, alone, wheeled about as if to fight, but before he fairly saw who his antagonist would be, he also went tumbling in a heap, a thousand stars dancing before his surprised and astonished eyes.

CHAPTER IX

A RAPID RUN TO STAR LAKE AND THE RESULT

The seemingly miraculous rescue of Billy Worth just when his very life had been threatened was the climax of the most exciting automobile run ever made between Lannington and Star Lake.

And for Billy's fortunate deliverance who was to be thanked? Peter Whaley,—black of skin, but white all through; true as steel and possessed of brains that he had learned to use. The colored boy, and no one else, had been the means of sending the timely assistance.

Happy and care-free, Pete had that morning answered to as many different names as he had received calls from Mr. Brush—ten or a dozen, at least. He had done all his work faithfully and well. In the lull of the afternoon, when the mid-day meal was over and the guests about

the hotel had dispersed for the time, some to take naps, some to indulge in rest or recreation in other forms, the versatile young darkey went for a quiet nap on the back lawn.

He saw Billy drive up in the Thirty and noticed lazily and, gladly, no doubt, that the two passengers were without baggage. It was unnecessary, then, for him to disturb himself, and, quite needless to mention, he didn't.

Still, Pete was not so far from wakefulness as to fail to observe the course Billy Worth took when he left the automobile to deliver the basket he carried. Indeed, he was so surprised to see the lad start off up the hill and along the north shore that he entirely awoke from his light doze, wondering where he could be going.

As Pete lay quietly meditating, his eyes half closed, the three members of the Star Lake club passed across the lawn within a few yards of him. He heard Jay Waldo say:

"Don't hurry, now. We've got to be about a mile down the bluff. No danger of anybody hearing that distance."

In the course of a day Uncle Joe's popular factotum heard so many portions of conversations that, ordinarily, he paid no attention to them. He might not have done so this time but for the sly stealth and venomous tone of the words he heard. They set him thinking. The suspicion grew in his mind that the trio of cousins were following Billy Worth. To satisfy himself he cautiously turned, and, feigning slumber, watched.

The three youths were keeping the trees and shrubbery between themselves and the hotel as much as possible. Pete noticed this fact at once. Their movements were not natural. They seemed to be sneakingly watching on all sides and yet trying to appear as if they were only out for an afternoon ramble.

Peter Whaley was convinced that something was wrong. He knew the characters of the three cousins and their hatred of the Auto Boys. He thought again of the words, "No danger of anybody hearing that distance," and their prob-

able significance rushed upon his mind like a whirlwind.

What should he do? Tell Mr. Brush? Summon help from among the guests and campers and hasten in pursuit? No, neither plan would do. The observing darkey well knew the desire of the Auto Boys to avoid annoying the jolly landlord with their quarrel with his guests. There was but one thing he could do. He must get Billy Worth's friends to the Lake at once, and without attracting too much notice.

Immediately his decision was made, Pete moved with all speed. Quietly but swiftly he entered the hotel and sought the telephone booth. Knowing of the boys' arrangement to receive special calls through the Knight & Wilder garage, he soon had that establishment on the line. Mr. Wilder answered. To him the colored lad made it plain that Phil Way, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones,—any one or all of them, if possible, were wanted at Star Lake immediately. Without stating the occasion of the sudden summons, Pete forcibly impressed the

junior partner at the garage with the fact that something was radically wrong and instant action was necessary.

"I'll have them out there in three shakes," Mr. Wilder almost shouted, and sprang from the telephone to Mr. Knight's big runabout standing idle to-day because of the senior partner's absence.

In a twinkling the light, powerful car was doing extreme violence to the speed ordinance as it raced toward Dr. Way's residence. Most luckily Phil, Paul and Dave were there, and not even back at their own little garage, but sitting on the porch as if for the express purpose of seeing Mr. Wilder drive furiously up.

"Pile in here!" the latter called excitedly, "you're wanted at the Lake as fast as this machine can get you there! All three of you!"

By the time the astonished boys had reached the curbing, Mr. Wilder had turned the car about. Springing out he said, "Pile in! You drive 'er, Way! Get to Star Lake quick as lightning. Something fierce is up! Don't know

what. Andrew Jackson Washington Bismarck—you know who—telephoned, scared to death! Let 'er out, now!"

If Mr. Wilder had been Con Cecil, and that young man had been rushing a car to aid the boys in sudden flight from the police that he believed fast closing in on them, he could not have been more urgent. Wholly disregarding their exclamations and questions, he pushed Phil to the driver's seat, Dave into the place beside him, and Paul to the rumble behind.

"Let 'er out, now! It may be life or death for all *we* know! Hang on, son!"

The latter words were for Paul, who had just time to clutch the supports provided for the occupant of the single rear seat, as the powerful machine leaped forward and was off.

"Something's happened to Bill, I bet!" shouted Phil Way above the terrific rush of the wind.

"Wha-a-a-t do-o you sup-pose it cou-ld be-e?" Paul managed with great effort to call in answer; but he was too busily occupied in keep-

ing his seat to say more when his question went unanswered.

Out on the country road the way was clear. How the big car did go then! Phil Way was watching every dip and curve of the roadway like a hawk. He grasped the wheel with steady hands and drove guardedly, but at such a pace!

On through the shade of the tree-skirted road! On with care and watchfulness with a zip and jolt over the railroad tracks! On and on over the smooth stretch of highway and at far too dangerous speed down the slope to the Lake! Skidding deeply in the soft earth, the car swung into the hotel drive and in another moment came to a halt before the porch. At the same instant Dave MacLester discovered Pete Whaley making frantic signals from the farthest end of the back lawn.

"There's Pete, now!" he said. "Run down where he is, Phil!"

The clutch sought its place again and in another five seconds the friendly darkey was telling the three excited boys why they had been

so strangely summoned. Quickly Pete related what he had seen and heard, and told his reason for being anxious to cause no disturbance among the hotel guests and the campers.

“Well, you’re the candy kid, all right! You for me!” warmly exclaimed Paul Jones, whose language was apt to be none too free from slang in time of excitement. “They’re a fine young bunch!” The latter expression obviously had reference to the three cousins.

Though Paul was not deeply impressed by the possible gravity of the harm which might have befallen Billy Worth, Phil and Dave fully realized that if Pete’s suppositions were correct their chum was in serious danger. Paul’s opinion was that nothing worse than taunting and impudence would be directed at Billy. The others saw far greater mischief afoot. Thanking the colored boy hastily, all three set off on a run up the hill and through the woods of the north shore.

So long as they could follow the path the rescue party had no trouble in knowing quite con-

fidently the way they should go. In the unbroken woods, however, they were quite at a loss to shape their course. Fortunately they decided to follow the shore line, as indicated by the brighter light shining among the trees to their left, and so hastened forward.

The murmur of violent tones in the distance soon guided the three wondering and excited boys and rapidly but cautiously they approached the place whence the sounds issued.

So occupied with their hateful determination to make Billy Worth sign the written apology were the members of the Star Lake club, they did not hear the approach of their unhappy victim's friends. Like a sudden cyclone the latter came down upon them. Dave MacLester's right fist took Martin Waldo off his feet and his left sent the ugly Sagger sprawling. Phil Way's swift drive on Jay Waldo's ribs made that young gentleman feel and look more homesick than a small dog tied tightly to a tin can.

"Look after Billy, Paul! Phil and I will give

these tin horns all they want and then some!" cried Dave. "A fine lot of parasites!"

But Paul Jones, disappointed that he had not had a hand in the first attack, owing to his having been just a step in the rear, was otherwise occupied. Like some dread avenger he stood over the prostrate form of the burly Sagger, ordering him to get up and give him (Paul) a chance at him.

"I'll give you a punch that'll put you to sleep, you bully! Get up! Why don't you get up and let me take a fall out of you, you big toad?"

Phil Way it was who at once abandoned the excitement of the fight to give Billy Worth the attention he much needed. In a hurry he cut the strap binding the captive's feet, and helped him to arise. He drew his handkerchief, also, to wipe the blood from Billy's face. Just as he did so, Jay Waldo, recovering at last from his surprise and the vigorous jarring his ribs had received, sprang toward him.

Phil's back was turned and he might have re-

ceived an ugly blow but for Worth's quickness. Like a flash the latter sent both fists hard under Jay's chin and the vain Mr. Waldo pitched backward as if a small charge of dynamite had gone off under him. He lay just as he fell, feigning insensibility. Nor did he move until a rather severe and, to tell the truth, unwarranted and mean kick from Paul Jones made him yell in pain and terror.

Dave MacLester meanwhile had dragged both Pitt Sagger and Martin Waldo to their feet. In the most urgent of tones he had invited and requested them again and again to "come on." But they wouldn't come. With a slap on Sagger's left cheek which made that youth stagger like a drunken man, he next turned his attention to Martin. The latter, however, with the wild cry, "Let me alone, you big lobster!" fled into the brush and did not return.

The whole affray, though requiring much time for the telling, occupied less than a minute. Paul had kicked Jay Waldo only once when Phil bade him desist. Sagger quickly followed Mar-

tin Waldo into the woods and was soon out of sight. Undoubtedly the humbled, crestfallen Jay would have done the same but, fighting mad as he was, he feared to rise.

When the excitement had thus subsided, it was found that Billy Worth, though not seriously hurt, was weak and exhausted by the rough experience through which he had passed. Tenderly as a sister Phil helped him to dress, then led him by way of a deep, narrow gully,—a water-course in time of wet weather—to the margin of the Lake. Here, with Dave and Paul standing guard, on the bluff above, the blood was washed from Billy's face and the cooling water dashed freely upon his neck and arms.

Much refreshed, but still showing many signs of harsh treatment, the unflinching Mr. Worth now proposed that they all four go in search of the scattered membership of the Star Lake club.

Phil put a damper on this suggestion, however, instantly. "We'll have plenty of time to even up the score with those chaps," he said,

confidently, "even if we don't count what they've already had as part of it."

Paul Jones rather liked Billy's proposal and said so, but Dave agreed with Phil perfectly for once, and the two carried the point.

It was better so. Nothing could have been gained by pursuing the three plotting cowards further. Their punishment would scarcely have been greater had they been whipped again. A higher power than the four friends possessed, too, was hastening the Star Lake club rapidly toward its just reward. A terrible retribution the Auto Boys could not foresee was on the way. Swift and swifter was it bearing down on the three cousins from Westerfield.

Slowly the four friends made their way through the woods, and took to the path leading out and down to the well-kept lawns about the hotel. As they came near the edge of the woods their attention was attracted to two men sitting on a fallen log and engaged in what seemed a rather violent conversation.

No word that was spoken did the boys hear

sufficiently well to know what was said, and they were passing on, at a distance of a dozen yards, before the men discovered that they were observed. As of one accord they rose and walked away, placing themselves farther and farther from the path. One, the Auto Boys noticed, was a tall, heavy man of perhaps fifty years. He was dressed in an outing suit of bright material and looked to be a prosperous, yet rather gay business man.

It was the other of the two, however, who attracted more particular attention. He was of middle age, as indicated by a drooping moustache fast turning gray. His slouch hat was pulled low over his forehead. His general attire was that of one who had not been fortunate in life's journey, or, if so, improvident.

"I declare, if there isn't 'Uncle!'" exclaimed Dave MacLester. "The one in the blue and gray suit. Hope he enjoys the society of his sweet nephews!"

"It's the other man that caught my eye," said Phil Way, pondering. "I've seen him before,

and not long ago. Maybe he came out in the car with me one day, but I don't think so. I've seen that funny way he has of looking back over one shoulder, then the other. I've seen that slouch hat, too."

"By jolly! So've I!" exclaimed Billy Worth.

"Oh, Billy, you ain't supposed to see anything. How can you with both peepers half shut?" laughed Phil.

CHAPTER X

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

Their friend, the colored lad of many names, the Auto Boys found waiting for them back of the hotel. First he was greatly concerned to see Billy Worth looking so badly used, but his sorrow changed to the gayest laughter as he learned what happened when the rescue party arrived.

“Ah’s jes be’n achin’ fur somebody to leahn dem brats sech a mighty good lesson!” he exclaimed. “Ah has to stan’ fur a lot of dere impidence, an’ it jes’ does do me mo’ good to heah tell how dey did git what’s be’n so long comin’ to ’em!”

That the four friends thanked Mr. Peter Whaley and offered him every possible sort of reward within their power, it is really needless to say. But Pete wanted nothing—would have

nothing, and insisted that the knowledge that the Star Lake club had received a drubbing was all the satisfaction he wanted. He gloried in the part he had played in the affray, by having called up Mr. Wilder, but was equally anxious that no word of it be whispered anywhere.

Here, then, was another reason for saying nothing at the hotel and but little elsewhere concerning the cowardly assault upon Billy and the fight which followed. That Mr. Brush would send the Star Lake club away in a hurry, if he knew what had taken place, there could be no doubt. That the cousins were liable to serve punishment under the law if their cowardly assault were reported to the authorities was equally apparent.

But the Auto Boys were content to let the matter drop without a word of complaint, rather than annoy the comfort-loving proprietor of the Brush hotel, or attach any unpleasant publicity to Star Lake as a quiet and high-class resort. Thus, before parting with the honest, loyal Pete, it was agreed by all that if the story of

the afternoon's adventure were made public the Star Lake club must tell it. And considering the ending of the affair, it did not appear highly probable that those three worthies would want to discuss the subject very extensively.

In Mr. Knight's big runabout Paul and Billy soon left for town. Phil and Dave remained to drive the Thirty home at the regular time of leaving the Lake, and incidentally to watch for the return of the routed membership of the Star Lake organization. They did not expect further trouble from that source, but deemed it prudent to be on guard.

As the two boys lingered near the automobile shed they saw the tall, gayly dressed man whom they took to be Mr. Sagger, uncle of the cousins, come strolling across the back lawn and pass on to the hotel. That the less prosperous looking individual, who had also been seen in the woods, was not with him attracted their notice. They gave the matter little thought at the time, though they did think of it a great deal later on.

Time for leaving the Lake came and the three cousins had not put in an appearance. Pete Whaley said he would watch for them and satisfy his own and his friends' curiosity as to their general bearing. That he did this may be mentioned right here.

From a rear window the young darkey gleefully saw the three youths sneak across the lawn and into the hotel just at dusk. They were a long time preparing themselves for dinner and a meeting with their uncle. Later he saw them on the wide veranda looking mean and sulky, out of sorts with themselves and with each other. Pete could hardly keep down his laughter until he reached the kitchen. There he broke into a perfect roar, and for a half-hour showed himself so mightily tickled that the chef at last indignantly drove him out.

Their colored friend's merriment and its cause made a good story for the Auto Boys when he saw them again, but, meanwhile, certain developments in their affairs had for the

time taken their minds to other subjects entirely.

The morning after the little battle on the bluff of the north shore Phil Way chanced to find a letter, addressed to himself, in the family library. At the same moment he heard Billy Worth's familiar whistle and, seizing the letter and his hat, ran out to where the latter waited beneath the elms.

Billy looked and felt little the worse for the previous day's adventure after a night's sound sleep, but thoughts of vengeance were in his mind. What he might not have proposed would be hard to say, had not Phil's letter given him fresh subjects to ponder over. Slowly Way poked a lead pencil under the flap of the envelope as he and Billy talked. With the same careless indifference he drew out and unfolded the written sheet within. Then his eyes opened wide and, "What's this? Listen here, Billy!" he exclaimed.

Very attentively, indeed, Billy did listen, looking over Phil's shoulder and following every

line and word of Con Cecil's extraordinary warning.

"By George! that crazy Cecil will go to the asylum over this Binski case yet," said Phil Way, finishing the letter. "Now how did he ever find out that we were there that Saturday night, do you suppose?"

"Jimminy Christmas, that ain't the worst of it!" Billy Worth ejaculated forcibly. "The cops are going to get after us, Phil! There's no end of trouble ahead. I guess we could show 'em that we didn't kill Binski and don't know who did, but whew! don't you see what Cecil's afraid of? He thinks maybe we couldn't. And I—Great land of lemon squeezers! do you suppose Con Cecil himself thinks we *did* rob the huckster?"

It was with reluctance that Phil Way, after much talk, accepted Billy's interpretation of the reporter's letter. He did agree, at last, that the matter was serious, but still held the question open in his mind until he should hear what Dave MacLester and Paul Jones might say.

Dave had made the trip to the Lake that morning and Paul was taking his turn on Mrs. Chase's lawn. With utmost impatience for a general council regarding the letter, Phil and Billy went to help Paul finish up his work, that the three of them might meet the car when Dave returned to the park entrance. This they did.

The Thirty rolled up ten minutes late, owing to a broken fan belt. However, it was but a short time until the three passengers had alighted and the four owners of the machine were gliding along the shadiest of the park drives.

"What's on your minds? Star Lake club looking for more trouble?" demanded Dave, noticing that Phil and Billy did not talk as much as usual. It was no new thing for the four to meet at the gateway of the park for a run in the car upon its return to town, but the quiet prevailing this time was by no means customary.

"Shut her down here in the shade. We've

got something to talk about, Dave," Phil answered, and the car came to halt almost at once and without a jar.

Paul had been told the contents of the letter but he—indeed, all three—listened eagerly as Phil Way read softly aloud. No response came from Dave, as expected. Paul remarked that the police would have been after them long ago, if they thought the anonymous card amounted to anything. Still Dave was silent.

"Gosh-all-hemlock! Mac, can't you say anything?" Billy exclaimed, at last, considerably nettled by the other's silence.

"Sure, I can! I can say that we'll all be arrested and that somebody'll appear to swear that we killed Binski," retorted Dave soberly. "Who wrote that card? That's the party who will try to swear the robbery onto us. That's the party who really does know who killed the huckster. So much is plain as A B C. Fine lot of stuff for the newspapers! I can see the headlines already: 'Auto Boys Pinched—Young Ruffians Who Killed Huckster Binski in the

Toils.' And what are you going to do about it? I knew blamed well things were coming our way too fine to last!"

"If we only knew who wrote that card!" Phil Way reflected aloud.

"Thunder! You don't suppose it was the same fellow who put that money in our box in the woods, do you?" asked Paul, doubtfully.

"Let's see that letter! Who remembers what the writing in that note left in the money box was like?" came in haste and excitement from Billy. Paul's question had given him a new thought.

The theory growing at once out of Billy's suggestion appealed to all four boys forcibly. Again the words, "Don't blab it," rang in their ears. Again they saw themselves counting the money, so strangely returned to their treasure chest, on that very Sunday before Binski was found unconscious. They saw again, in their thoughts, the written message left for them go sailing off in a gentle breeze into the valley.

Try as they would, not one of the four chums

could say positively that the writing traced from the post-card by Con Cecil was not like that they had found with the money in the woods. Neither could they say that it was the same or similar.

"We'll go to the Ravine this very afternoon. We'll try to find that note," announced Phil Way with determination.

To agree to this was easy all around but what further should be done was a problem. The boys did not doubt that there was almost certain to be a call from the police to learn all about their presence at the huckster's place at about the time he was assaulted. That they were likely to be charged with the murder seemed altogether probable—at least, to Dave.

Billy was alarmed, also, concerning the prospect of serious difficulty, but more hopeful. Phil was calm and ready to face what came when it did come. He still inclined to the belief that Con Cecil was unnecessarily excited and worried over the whole Binski matter.

Paul Jones alone refused to feel the gravity

of the situation. "Oh, the police are a bunch of dubs! Con Cecil's crazy as a bed-bug and—Well, I don't care, it's a measly shame to pester us with all this business when we haven't time to bother!" he declared in his own peculiar style—a style that showed itself most prominently when he spoke with emphasis.

An unlimited discussion failed to change the situation the boys faced. The only result was that in four homes there were excuses made that noon for being late for dinner. Undoubtedly, every excuse was different from every other one, and none, it is safe to say, was fully and completely the real reason for tardiness.

Never before had the boys been so greatly tempted to omit one of the scheduled trips to the Lake as they were that afternoon. The one thing they wanted to do was search Gleason's Ravine for the bit of paper they had permitted the wind to carry off on that memorable Sunday. Impatient and anxious, the Lake trip, never neglected yet, they found for once a bug-bear and a burden.

“Hurry back, Mac! We’ll meet you at the park,” cried Billy Worth, as the Thirty left the little garage, driven for the first time by unwilling hands; and David answered, “You for me,” in a way that gave emphatic assent.

In fact, a strict interpretation of young Mr. MacLester’s expression, as he meant it, would be that he did fully intend to make all possible haste, and that he would be counting fully upon seeing Billy, Phil and Paul at the meeting place designated. Perhaps it did not matter that the actual words he spoke no more signified this than they meant, “Eggs are thirty cents a dozen.” But he was understood, even though good English was butchered, hung and quartered.

Although the boys fully realized that to search for the lost note after so much time had passed would certainly result in failure, they lost no time in getting to the Ravine immediately when Dave returned from Star Lake with the car. As on a former trip to Gleason’s in the machine, one of the lads,—this time Billy—

remained in the auto at the roadside while the others were absent.

Hastening through the woods, the three crossed the silent, lonely valley and eagerly clambered up the opposite hillside to the Retreat.

"It was just from here," said Paul, "that that note went sailing off," and he indicated the place by standing upon the identical spot, as he remembered it.

"Stay right where you are, then, Paul," Phil commanded, "and you and Dave call out to me when I get down to about the place where the paper fell, as nearly as you can remember it. Seems to me that with all the brush and branches on the ground it could not have been blown very far, once it settled down."

Phil's experiment was of no avail, however, and his hopes were unrewarded. Paul and Dave were not able to indicate satisfactorily even the approximate alighting place of the bit of paper and when, one after another, and then all together, they had sought in vain to find that

mysterious message, they were obliged to pronounce it a fruitless task.

The undergrowth of the valley made the search all the more hopeless, for in the weeks since the note was found, the grass, weeds and every tiny shrub and plant had been shooting rapidly upward and putting forth fresh sprouts and additional foliage. The same condition existed along the hillside and about the cave or hut, save where the earth was tramped hard, directly before the door of the Retreat. But while this growth on all sides served to prevent the making of one discovery, it was the means of bringing about another which proved to be important and interesting.

As the boys gave over the search for the lost note, their attention turned to the treasure box, still hidden, though empty now, beneath the boulder near by.

"Let's have a look, just for fun," proposed Phil, and led the way to the great stone.

"Say! Somebody's been here!" exclaimed Paul Jones, suddenly. "Somebody's been here,

sure! See, they have almost worn a path right up to the big rock."

It was true. While the undergrowth was not dense enough to cover the ground completely, the fact that the wild vegetation had been tramped upon repeatedly was plainly noticeable.

"Maybe they've been leaving some more cash for us!" suggested Dave. "The old rock is just what the path leads to," he went on, his voice rising with excitement, as he pushed ahead to the boulder.

"Now wait, Dave! Let's see whatever signs there are that anyone has been getting into the money box. Lot of sense they must think we have to leave any cash here again!"

With careful scrutiny the boys examined the approach to the treasure chest's hiding-place. They believed they found evidence that the small stone covering the hole under the larger rock had been removed and replaced, but could not be certain. Notwithstanding, they drew the

roughly-made casket forth and with great curiosity opened it.

"Fudge! I could have told you there was nothing in it," said Dave MacLester, with characteristic dejection.

"Oh, nobody said anything about there being money in the box but you, you Chinaman!" Paul Jones fired back.

Phil laughed. He had expected nothing and was not disappointed. He was, however, a great deal puzzled to know why that path had been made to the big boulder. That it did lead to the rock, and not beyond it, was very clear. And since this was its terminus, where was its beginning? That was a question worth looking into and Phil called attention to the fact.

The search which followed revealed but little. The undergrowth was tramped from the door of the Retreat to the rock. There was no sign of a path approaching the cave from any other direction. Only one solution of the puzzle, then, could there be. The person or persons who had visited the spot had climbed down the bare and

rocky ledge stretching up at either side of the half-cave, half-cabin.

Up this ledge all three boys went clambering. The land on the higher level was dotted with brush and trees for some distance back from the edge of the valley. Beyond, there was an old and almost barren pasture, bordered by a corn-field. No distinct trace of a path could the lads find. The earth was dry and the grass and other low vegetation of the open woods too tough to be easily broken down by passing footsteps.

Yet one sign that some one had lately been in the neighborhood was found. Tucked almost out of sight beneath an old, decaying log was a thumb-marked and dirty copy of an old newspaper—The Lannington Tribune. It contained under great, black headlines the story of the robbery of Michael Binski and the finding of the huckster unconscious. The paper bore the appearance of having been read again and again.

CHAPTER XI

HELPING TYLER GLEASON

Anxious and not a little worried as they were by the contents of Mr. Cecil's letter, the newspaper found above the Retreat was not a pleasant discovery for the Auto Boys to make. Somehow, it seemed to shout at them the very thing about which they least wished to hear, and that was the tragedy of the lonely road. Somehow, the soiled and worn pages of print seemed to bring the whole terrible story directly to their door and seek to fasten it there.

"Nothing but an old newspaper and it might be *any* newspaper and *any* date," said Phil Way quietly, yet just a little nervously. "It is only a coincidence that the paper is just the one it happens to be."

"Well, I wish Binski had run and jumped off the earth before ever we did a stroke of work

for him," Paul Jones growled, savagely. "I hate this botheration like forty, plague take it!"

Dave made no comment on the situation. He saw only trouble, and maybe very serious trouble ahead and concluded that for once he would not anticipate it by predicting its coming.

None the wiser for their work, so far as the warning from Mr. Cecil and the anonymous card the police had received were concerned, the three boys returned to the broad highway and Billy Worth in waiting for them. The latter had not been altogether idle in their absence but, on the contrary was able to tell of an interesting talk he had had with Tyler Gleason.

The owner of the Ravine had driven by on his way home from town while Billy was waiting at the roadside. Glad to see one of his young friends again, he stopped his team.

"D'ye think that autymobile would do to draw wood in next winter?" the farmer asked, smilingly, when greetings had been exchanged. "Because," he went on, more seriously, "I'm thinking my man Neely won't be here 'g'in the

time comes. Can't make him out, lately. Last time I saw ye he was actin' queer, as I told ye. Been worse, if anything, since. Now an' ag'in he'll work like all get out; then he'll get down in the mouth an' ain't worth shucks. Wish't I could get you boys to help me some. Here the hayin' is on an' grass jes' spoilin'. Neely ain't no better'n half a man. I'd have let him go, an' found somebody else, but that he's owin' me. Kept always askin' for money till at last blamed if I didn't find he'd drawed about the hull summer's wages. Don't see what he done with it."

Billy Worth said he would try to arrange for helping the farmer with his work for a few days, at least, as an accommodation, if nothing more. "But," said he, "maybe we wouldn't be worth much, except to pull weeds, or something like that."

"You leave that to me," Mr. Gleason answered. "Dan Dilworth looks after some business for me now an' ag'in, an' if what he says

is right, you four boys, or any one of ye, will be worth as much as so many men, any day."

This compliment from the eccentric old lawyer pleased Billy very much. It pleased Phil and Paul also, and even Dave MacLester smiled and said, "First time anyone ever heard of Dan Dilworth tossing bouquets around!"

Tyler Gleason's increased need of help on the farm and his continued dissatisfaction with Duck Neely afforded one subject for conversation as the Auto Boys drove slowly back to the city. It was fortunate that a fresh topic had arisen just at this time, too, for the letter from Con Cecil was not a pleasant one. The warning note, the path leading to the big stone, the newspaper above the Retreat and the whole horrible story of the lonely little house on the neglected road, could not be entirely avoided, however.

Even when none of these things were mentioned, there remained with the boys a constant and unpleasant sense of unrest. In the background of their thoughts the consciousness of

the trouble threatening was always present. Their usually buoyant feelings could not but feel the weight of their anxiety. The storm clouds hung over them very heavily now and to the farthest depth of their oppressive shadows the only ray of light which shone was the certain knowledge of their innocence. No matter what might be charged against them,—regardless of the circumstantial evidence which might connect them with the Binski tragedy,—they knew they were in no way guilty.

That part of Con Cecil's letter, in which he suggested to Phil that Dr. Way be informed of the card the police had, and what might come of it, was discussed at some length. The decision the boys reached, however, was to say nothing to anyone until it was found necessary. If the worst came, then fathers and mothers would have to know everything. There would be no escaping the unpleasant publicity, no manner of saving relatives and friends from sharing in the disgrace, and the distasteful notoriety, accompanying their being taken into custody.

On the other hand, if the authorities paid little attention to the card, or only sought to find the writer, believing that that person must know something of the robbery, the remote connection of the Auto Boys with the mystery might never be made public. The fact that they had, innocently enough, even carried to the scene of the tragedy the very club with which the police said the assault was committed, would not be told—would never embarrass their fathers, mothers, sisters or friends, or cause any one humiliation.

Not all at one time did the four friends arrive at the conclusions which have been stated. They talked the whole matter over at various intervals. It was Sunday afternoon, in the shade of the old elms, that their final judgment was agreed upon.

At the same time and place, also, a decision was reached to lend a hand to Tyler Gleason. By taking turn about, the auto service would not be interfered with. The regular work in town could be continued, while placing at Mr. Gleason's disposal the services of the four boys.

son's disposal at the same time two pairs of feet and hands and strong young arms.

Enough of novelty entered into the boys' plan for helping the farmer to make the prospect interesting. This fact, coupled with the stern necessity of earning more money than was now coming in, to pay the debt on their automobile, made the opportunity Tyler Gleason offered a very welcome one. Perhaps if the Auto Boys could have foreseen the outcome of their undertaking, they would have been much less at ease, as they discussed it, if not less eager to begin.

The plan to help with the work on Gleason's farm had for its most pleasant feature a rapid drive in the Thirty each night and morning. Paul, for instance, would take Phil and Billy to the country very early and return with the machine in time to make the regular trip to the Lake. In the evening, after the car had returned from the scheduled afternoon run, and the day's work was done, Paul and Dave would drive to Gleason's to carry the two young farmhands home. Next day the car would be in

Billy's charge or Phil's, and so on,—providing, always, that two of the four should be at the farm while the others were taking care of the company's regular business.

Very well pleased, indeed, was Tyler Gleason when, coming from the barn on Monday morning, a bucket of milk in each hand, he saw an automobile turn swiftly into his drive and two lads in broad-brimmed straw hats spring out. "Who sent for farm-hands?" they cried cheerily.

Very little formality was observed in starting Phil and Billy to work. Mr. Gleason expressed his pleasure in seeing them, and was more than glad to learn he could count on having two of the four active young fellows to help him every day for a week or two at least. But when Phil said they were ready to begin at any time, the farmer replied quickly: "Sure pop! There's hoes on the fence there; ye might tackle the weeds in the garden potato patch till I get the chores done up."

Duck Neely passed and re-passed the garden

where the boys were at work. They called "Hello," upon first seeing him, but he answered only with a nod. Presently he was seen driving with a mower to the field back of the barn and the merry clink of the machinery soon told that he was at work there. In a short time Tyler Gleason had another team hitched to a hay wagon and invited Phil and Billy to hop on and help haul in hay, already cut and cured.

It was not easy work. The sun was glaring and the breeze so slight that perspiration started from every pore, as the two boys pitched the dry hay up to the farmer on the wagon. It was no easier to stow away the sweet-smelling but heavy, tangled mass in the depths of the big mow in the barn. With many a joke and laugh, and keen relish of the thought that Paul and Dave would find out what it was like next day, however, the lads noticed the time passing quickly and not unpleasantly.

After dinner Phil and Billy found Duck Neely smoking his pipe in the grateful shade of an old apple tree. He had nothing to say at

the common table, where all sat down to the noon-day meal, and the boys resolved to find out why he was so unlike his former self. For Neely was pretty good-natured, ordinarily. Short and heavy, with a very round, red face which, though it indicated no great extent of intellect, certainly had nothing bad about it, he was rated a strong, willing worker, and honest and reliable. Long years before his peculiar waddling gait had earned for him the nickname by which he was always addressed.

"Brace up, Duck; you're as grouchy as a chauffeur with a flat tire!" said Billy, and he and Phil dropped down on the ground beside the hired man.

"Never you mind *me*," said Mr. Neely, and that was all he did say.

"Pretty day," observed Phil, with a sly wink at Billy.

Mr. Neely made no response.

"Duck Neely," burst out Billy Worth, after a minute or two of steadfast silence on part of all, "Duck Neely, if you are sore about any-

thing, spit it out! Let's know what it is. If you aren't, rouse up! Be sociable! Don't be such a blamed porcupine!"

For perhaps a half minute Mr. Neely still continued silent, smoking his big, black pipe meditatively.

"Let me tell you fellows something," said the hired man at last. "If you knowed what I know, an' if ye was as scared for your very life as I be, you'd get sullen and sulky too, I bet, an' I wouldn't blame ye nuther. So jest shet up. I ain't got no kick comin' 'gainst any you boys an' I don't owe you nothin', nuther. Jest let me *be*, that's what *I* say. Don't butt in! Good many people do that an' are sorry for it afterwards. So'd you be, too! Let me be an' if ye think there's any danger of yer rememberin' that I spoke a bloomin' word, furget it!"

"Oh, we don't want to butt in, Duck, or meddle in your affairs at all," Phil answered. "Simple size of it is, that you never were so glum before, and Bill and I just thought we'd jolly you up a little."

"Cut it out," was the gloomy, sulky response. "Ye can't do me no good unless ye can lend a me a hundr'd dollars, or any part of it, an' I happen to know that you can't."

"Wish we could, Duck," responded Billy Worth, hopefully, and then he sang a little tune to some such words as "Sorry I ain't got it, you could have it if I had it."

"That's me! By gosh, that's me! 'All in, down an' out,' for sure," growled the hired man, but he laughed, though harshly, too, as he picked himself up and went to get his horses to return to work.

The afternoon seemed unusually long to the two amateur farm-hands, for Tyler Gleason believed in making hay while the sun shone, both literally and figuratively. With every trip to the barn, however, the boys had the opportunity to drink their fill of the most delicious, pure spring water from the well, iced ginger water prepared by Mrs. Gleason, or fine, fresh buttermilk from the springhouse. Their exertions

made these simple beverages a most delightful treat.

At six o'clock all hands were called to supper, and though Phil and Billy had distinguished themselves by the magnitude of their appetites at noon, they added fresh lustre to their fame at the evening meal.

Mrs. Gleason was a small, busybody sort of an old lady but kind as could be. The extraordinary capacity the two boys showed for dried beef, new potatoes in cream and bread and butter and coffee of which fare the supper principally consisted, really amazed the good soul; but to supply the lads to their utmost limit was her particular delight, nevertheless. Smiling, and in the best of good humors, she saw that they wanted for nothing which the simple menu could supply.

Weary, but happy, their faces flushed by the day's labor, the Binski case and all the uneasiness it caused for the time forgotten, Phil and Billy walked out to the yard when supper was over, just as Dave and Paul came up in the car.

Smoothly, easily, the Thirty flew into the drive and came softly to a halt at the Gleason door.

"Fellows, I've got a thought," said Billy Worth, suddenly, when greetings had been exchanged. "I tell you I have a *thought!*" he exclaimed with emphasis.

"Shucks! That's nothing, I've got a *blister*," said Phil Way, tenderly rubbing the inner edge of his right thumb.

"Tell you what we'll do," Billy went on, refusing to heed Phil's comment. "We'll take Mr. and Mrs. Gleason for a ride in the machine. They've never been in an auto in their lives!"

A favorable response was unanimous from the other lads. In the early twilight, a half-hour later, when Mr. Gleason had, with active young helpers, finished his chores; and Mrs. Gleason, with help from the same source—be it said to the everlasting credit of the Auto Boys—had finished washing the supper dishes, the good farmer and his wife were carried away over the fine roads in the most comfortable manner imaginable.

The heat had gone from the day, and the cooling breeze, as the Thirty rushed swiftly forward, coupled with the fine sensation of rapid motion, was a luxury the two had never known before. Needless to say the Auto Boys would be welcome at the Gleason farm whenever they passed that way, forever afterward. Not merely because of the auto ride the husband and wife enjoyed; no, not by a hundred-year margin; but because of the thoughtfulness and courtesy which prompted the invitation, and the helpful hands which contributed to make its acceptance possible.

Duck Neely resolutely declined to be a party to the outing. He sat gloomily on the porch with Paul and Dave while the others were absent. Not a word save monosyllabic answers to questions could the boys draw from him and soon they gave him no further attention.

Moody and silent, Neely still sat as before, when the car returned. His position was unchanged even when the four chums called good-night to all, and the Thirty, fresh and ready al-

ways, sped away down the drive, onto the broad, white road and to the city merrily.

“My! Are you here at last?” exclaimed Phil Way’s mother, as the car glided gently into the little garage. “Someone has telephoned three times, asking for you, Phil, or for any of the boys. There are two men at Knight & Wilder’s, who insist that they must go to Star Lake to-night, and that no one else can take them. I don’t like it; I don’t like it a bit! And how tired you must all be!”

CHAPTER XII

A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

With many gentle assurances that it was not late, and that neither he nor any of the boys were very tired, Phil dismissed his mother's anxiety. She returned to the house feeling very secure in the reflection that four other such thoroughly good, trustworthy boys could not be found anywhere.

Maybe so; but what mother would not think the same?

The fact is, and there can be no doubt about it, that any boy who cannot be honestly considered by his mother to be one of the best boys in the world, is not as truthful, as honest, as clean inside and out, or as reliable and decent as he ought to be, by a very wide margin. Mothers, so charitable, so eager to overlook a thousand faults and shortcomings! What a

pity for any chap to fail to be at least as honorable and square and downright honest and good as to win his mother's praise!

"You and Paul skip along and get to bed, Dave. You'll be up against something to-morrow, eh, Billy?" said Phil with one of his quiet laughs. "We two will take those men to the Lake and be all the better for the ride."

The suggestion met with approval all around. In two minutes the car was under motion again, and in scarcely a greater space of time came to a stop before Knight & Wilder's establishment. Directly there came a young man accompanied by another, much older, from a patch of darkness outside the big open doors of the garage, and a low but familiar voice:

"Who is it? Phil Way?"

"Well, hello here, Con Cecil!" exclaimed the one addressed, and Billy echoed the greeting.

"No—no! Don't call me by name. Not a word, mind you, to anybody about this trip either," said Mr. Cecil in an undertone. He shook hands with the two friends and climbed

into the tonneau. The stranger with him followed and Billy closed the door.

"Now don't go fast. Don't do anything to attract any special attention," Con Cecil said in the same low undertone. "Take us to Star Lake just as you would any other passengers. We'll get out at the door and you drive your car on to the shed you use. Be ready to bring us back again when I send for you. There'll be no sign of mystery or anything unusual. The only thing is to act natural and pretend you don't know me. Gee, this is going to be hot stuff! I'll tell you all about it, sometime," whispered the reporter with suppressed excitement.

"Say, we want to talk to *you* about something, too," exclaimed Billy Worth as the car started.

"Sure you *do*!" Cecil answered significantly, "but not now. I'm on the job of my life! It will be off my hands mighty soon, though, and then I'm going to give you Auto Boys some quiet tips. I haven't forgotten you, you bet!"

Gently as a bird flies, and at whatever speed desired, the auto purred through the city's streets and on along the familiar road to the Lake. What a well behaved car it was! As if its engine and its very tires understood and appreciated the loving care bestowed upon every portion of the machine, the Thirty responded always to every touch upon its devices; rarely missing, seldom developing trouble in any way, and never, thus far, to any serious extent.

Quietly as a bird, too, the car stopped at the porch of the Brush hotel. Con Cecil and the stranger alighted and without a word went within. As the rays of the porch lights fell upon the elder man, Phil and Billy noticed that he was a much sun-burned, rather angular person of sixty years or more. His dress seemed to indicate a prosperous mechanic—a master carpenter or other out-of-doors worker, perhaps, the lads agreed.

They were waiting beside the car under the trees at the foot of the drive. From a boat

on the water near by there came, from time to time, fragments of song. The voices of the Star Lake club were easily recognized.

"I — stood — on — the — bridge — at — mid — night." The words and the old, familiar air came floating in from the boat. It was Jay Waldo's voice.

"Pity somebody didn't push him off!" exclaimed Billy Worth with contempt.

The jest struck Phil Way in some very risible spot and he laughed immoderately. Quickly it became evident that those on the water recognized the source of the laughter and that they immediately imagined it a shaft aimed at Jay's vocal efforts.

"Haw, haw, haw!" came the coarse, mocking tones of Pitt Sagger. "You better go soak your *own* head."

Pitt had made a mess of it, as he always did when trying to say something smart, and Billy joined loudly in Phil's laughter.

Angry retorts came from the boat off shore, accompanied by threats of "punched heads"

and "broken necks," but, strange as it may appear, neither Phil nor Billy were seriously alarmed. Remembering Con Cecil's injunction to attract no particular attention while on this trip, however, they refrained from acknowledging the compliments hurled at them.

Receiving no response, the three cousins contented themselves by yelling "Coward" and "Where's yer sand?" a few times. They made no move to run close in shore, apparently, for presently the sound of their voices died out in the distance.

Soon afterward came Pete Whaley to say that the gentlemen who had come in the car were ready to return.

Quickly and quietly the Thirty drew up before the brightly lighted porch again and with easy indifference Con Cecil swung himself into the tonneau. The stranger followed, but in a fussy, fidgety way that seemed to suggest some particular uneasiness. Phil Way closed the door after the stranger had fumbled with it unsuccessfully, sprang up to his seat beside Billy at

the wheel, and the car moved swiftly away. There came an audible chuckle from the rear seat. "It's working our way fine," said Con Cecil, as if to himself.

As the auto reached the city Mr. Cecil requested that he and his friend be allowed to get out at the park entrance. The car was stopped there, accordingly, and the two men alighted.

"Stroll on ahead, Uncle Silas. I must talk with the boys a minute," the reporter suggested. Without a word the stranger did as requested. He seemed a most remarkably taciturn fellow. Not more than once had the lads heard his voice and then only in some low remark to Con Cecil.

"I've been in Westerfield most of the time since I saw you last," the newspaper man continued, when the three were alone. "I know from the remark Billy made that you got my letter, though. Have you seen or heard anything further?"

"Say, Con, look here, do you think—"

"Can't tell," Mr. Cecil interrupted hurriedly, guessing at the question Phil was trying to ask and guessing wrong. "Can't tell anything about it. They may treat that card as just a joke. They may be terribly close to you this minute."

"But we—" Billy Worth tried to get a word in here but he, too, was interrupted.

"No, listen," the reporter went on rapidly. "I've got to catch that next Westerfield train before anyone knows I'm here. I want you to hear this, though. Keep mum. I honestly believe the police have dropped the Binski business entirely. There's other fish for them to fry, and the joke of it is, I'm going to fry the particular fish in question myself. Now, I'll be here again in a couple of days or so, and will get some information for you. Until then, in heaven's name, keep your mouths shut tight. So so-long, or I'll miss that train."

Like a shot Cecil was gone. Had he been less absorbed with other matters, he must surely have noticed that the two boys were more inter-

ested in telling him something than in receiving any information he could give them. But while he still believed, undoubtedly, that his friends stood liable to arrest for a terrible crime, he considered them in no immediate danger, and meanwhile he was exceedingly occupied with, to him, a most important and pressing matter.

What mystery was the young reporter trying to solve now? What manner of news could it be that took him to Star Lake, and what connection had the stranger with it all? A dozen such questions did Phil Way and Billy Worth propound to each other on their homeward way. The strange features of this night trip appealed to their romantic imaginations very strongly, and they discussed them at length.

But the boys wished they had been able to learn just what connection Con Cecil supposed them to have had with the assault upon the huckster. Evidently he was pretty serious when he admonished them to keep tight lips. However, neither of the two subjects was in any manner disposed of when the Thirty made

the floor of the little garage creak, and the chums bade each other good-night.

Tired? So tired he just managed to get into bed before falling asleep, Phil Way soon forgot the long, busy day's experiences. Tired? So tired he just could not have "wiggled another step," he solemnly assured himself, Billy Worth covered the distance between the green and yellow garage and his own home.

A very few minutes and he too was slumbering. It is a good, old-fashioned word. Paul Jones would have said "pounding his ear." His meaning would have been the same. Either way, and in any event, the fact remains that Billy Worth was, for the time, "the world forgetting and by the world forgot," absolutely and completely.

* * * * *

It is a pretty good sign of very active interest in some enterprise or undertaking when a lively young fellow of fifteen or so, possessed of perfectly normal inclinations, rolls out of bed and jumps into his clothes a little after sunrise

without so much as being called. When four such lads do this, and all on the same morning, it might be called, in some cases, almost a miracle. It was nothing of the sort, however, with Phil Way, Billy Worth, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones.

No, indeed! The business training the four friends had gained in their various enterprises had taught them the necessity of being up and doing. Often times, no doubt, it was with inward protests that they cut short their morning naps; but once up, their lively interest in the joint undertakings on hand made them glad to have done so.

Just at this time, however, stern conditions were making themselves felt. The note for four hundred dollars, given in the purchase of the automobile, would be falling due at the end of September. It would require an extra effort to meet it. Met it must be. To have their dearly loved car taken from them—to suffer such humiliation and face their friends again,—were thoughts too unpleasant to contemplate. There

was only one alternative. All hands must join in adding to the slowly growing bank account of the transportation company. The earnings of the Young American Contract Company, too, must be applied to the same fund.

But on the other hand, it was pleasant, anyway, to be up and out in the air and sunshine in the freshness of the morning. Particularly pleasant was it to go for a rapid ride thus early in the day. The streets and country roads were quite free of other conveyances. The speed limits seemed naturally to relax somewhat under these circumstances and invite a vigorous attack without a threat of possibly unpleasant consequences.

So it was when the chums drove out this morning to Gleason's farm. Dave and Paul were eager to try their hands at helping with the harvest. Phil and Billy, being human, and human boys at that, were quite as eager that they should. They had had their experience the day before. While they did not regret it, and would be ready for the work again on the

day following, there was something really pleasant and mirth-provoking in the contemplation of the toil and heat and perspiration that their companions must endure. Strange that human nature should always enjoy such things!

Tyler Gleason hurried out to meet the Auto Boys as the Thirty, with a loud blast of the horn, turned into the drive.

"My, but it's a relief to see ye!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what I'd ever do! Duck Neely has vamoosed. Gone, hide and hair, and owin' me close to forty dollars! Never went to bed last night at all! Left him settin' on the stoop jest as he was when you boys started home, an' me an' my wife went to bed, an' that's the last we seen of him. But I've been expectin' it—I've been expectin' it! An' you boys help me through hayin' and we'll be all right yet."

CHAPTER XIII

BAWLED OUT FOR FAIR

Although some time had passed, and the Star Lake club had made no apparent effort to retaliate for the drubbing received at the hands of the Auto Boys, it must not be supposed that the incident was forgotten. Lacking in many things the club undoubtedly was, but spite, vengeful feelings and capacity for mischief were not among them.

A great variety of plans for revenge had the cousins discussed but without finding any which seemed severe enough upon the Auto Boys and safe enough for themselves. A serious warning their uncle had given them, about this time, too, against attracting any unnecessary notice to themselves or him, was an obstacle in the path of their spite and hatred. Whatever they did must be quite in secret. Their wits, feeble

enough in some ways, but usually strong for mischief-making, were taxed to the utmost.

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, a way to bring humiliation and suffering upon the four chums they so vigorously hated opened itself to the trio of highly moral and self-respecting cousins. It happened that Martin Waldo and Pitt Sagger had gone to their room in the hotel for a nap one afternoon, and, though lying down, were still wide awake, when, through the open door connecting with the room their uncle occupied, they heard him and some second person enter.

"Keep still," whispered Martin. "Let's hear what's going on." Pitt nodded assent and they listened.

As their uncle and the person with him talked in low tones, the latter's voice the two boys recognized as that of a Mr. Rydick. This man, Mr. Sagger had told them, was employed by him to search for signs of oil and gas in different localities. As his explorations were of the

most secret nature, his connection with their uncle the lads were never to notice or mention.

True, the cousins had taken Mr. Rydick in the car to one point and another, at different times, but his investigations were always concealed by some pretense of being bent upon other errands. Some times he even traveled in disguise. In all cases the boys had strict instructions to ask no questions and to carry no tales. Naturally any or all of them were eager to hear—or overhear—whatever might reveal their relative's connection with the rich discoveries the stranger might be making.

“The reason I insisted on coming here, even after you had told me not to,” Mr. Rydick said, when the two men had entered Mr. Sagger's room, “is this letter.”

Pitt and Martin did not know what their uncle read, but they heard him say, presently: “Gone, has he? Well, what of it?”

“Why, it means that there's nothin' doin' on the Gleason premises, for one thing, but it means more'n that, too. I'm afraid he knows

too much. I hate to think that he ain't where I can watch him,—at any rate, know where he is and what he's at."

"Yes; that's so," came the response in a guarded tone. "What else?"

"I don't know but that is all of that; but there's another thing. The boys who run that auto between here and Lannington are working for Gleason—some of them, anyway. They are the ones that were at the Binski place the Saturday night he was touched. It won't do for me to prospect on the Gleason place when there are too many around."

"Let's see," said the uncle, in the same low tones both men used, but with some sarcasm in his voice,—“Let's see! The police received a card suggesting that they would do well to find the boys who were seen there, at about that time, didn't they? Evidently they haven't done much about it."

"No, they ain't."

"Rather slow, aren't they? But what do I care about that huckster affair? Nothing. So

don't mention it again; now mind that. This very polite party, who sends you a letter saying he can be of no further use to you, I possibly am interested in. I see nothing for it but that you will have to give up the work on Mr. Gleason's very likely looking farm. In the meantime don't *you* do any more writing. Of all the fool performances ever coming within my observation, I think that of yours was the worst. And this friend of yours,—let me know at once if you hear from him again. In the meantime forget the Gleason place. It will keep. Try a new field. If you see a likely chance for gas or oil in some other locality, I may be interested."

"Just as you say," Mr. Rydick answered.

His voice, as compared to that of their uncle, even the two listening boys noticed was cautious, even timid. It always had been so. But as his work was of a secret nature, its character would naturally be reflected in his manner. On the other hand, their uncle's voice was masterful and commanding. Even in the low

158 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

tones he used to-day he seemed to show superiority and to demand obedience.

When the two men had left Mr. Sagger's room, which, after some further conversation, they did, Martin Waldo sat upright on his bed and tried literally to hug himself.

"Pitt Sagger!" he exclaimed, gleefully, "I'm a wonder."

This very modest declaration caused young Mr. Sagger to sit up, as if to obtain a better view of so remarkable a creature. "Huh?" said he, in his slow way.

"I say I'm a cracker-jack for bully plans," the exuberant Martin answered. "You heard what Rydick said about these four dubs that run that automobile! They were seen around that huckster's place the night he was soaked. I never knew that before! Maybe we won't bawl 'em out for fair, eh? That's my scheme. How does it listen?"

"Hi, there, we know something about you, all right!" we'll yell at 'em," Pitt suggested, with his coarse laugh, his stupid eyes brighten-

ing somewhat as he slowly comprehended Martin's plan.

"Oh, you lunk-head!" the latter exclaimed savagely. Then with sarcasm, "'We know something about you, all right!' You talk like a fish! You get the idea, all right, but you go at it like a kindergarten! We'll yell, 'Who knows who hit Binski?' or something like that.'"

As the young gentleman addressed was quite accustomed to such delicate compliments as were, in this instance, bestowed upon him, he gave them no heed, but laughed loudly, thinking of the embarrassment the Auto Boys would suffer.

Jay Waldo was found at once and made acquainted with what had been overheard and Martin's plan to make this knowledge available. To the latter's surprise, Jay seemed more interested in hearing every portion of the conversation between their uncle and Mr. Rydick than in the proposed "bawling out" of the Auto Boys.

Some fairly intelligent people, it is possible,

might have been at a loss to know of just what "bawling out," and especially "bawling out for fair," consisted; but Jay appeared to have no difficulty on that score. What he did want to know, however, was who had written the letter which Mr. Rydick was so anxious their uncle should see and why the communication was considered important.

No information on these subjects could Pitt or Martin give. They—and Jay, too, for that matter—were used to hearing their uncle talk in a mysterious way. Often he had told other men, particularly Mr. Rydick, what to do and what not to do. To his nephews he never spoke of his affairs, save to tell them that a lawyer and business man necessarily had the confidence of many kinds of people, and they—the boys—should never ask questions or open their lips to anyone concerning even his coming or his going.

The consequence was that, to Pitt and Martin, at least, the only particularly interesting portion of the conversation overheard was that

concerning the chums they so keenly desired to injure.

Whether Jay Waldo knew more, or suspected more, than his cousins, that he was more curious than they regarding the information Mr. Rydick brought, is a question. Being more alert and generally attentive to things going on about him than either of the others, he possibly had opinions regarding some transactions which he did not reveal. Be that as it may, his judgment of the scheme Martin broached was adverse.

"You've been told often enough to keep from attracting a lot of notice," he said. "Now you want to do that very thing! Suppose somebody asks you how *you* know those sardines were at that Binski place! That's just what would happen the first time you bawled 'em out."

"Shoot it! It must be plenty of people know it, or how would Rydick get to hear of it?" demanded Martin, not at all pleased to have his very happy thought rejected.

"Shut up!" retorted Jay. He was irritated

by his cousin's manner, and his style of conversation was not overwhelmingly polite at any time. "Rydick knows enough things that ain't public property," he went on. "Uncle John, too! So you close your trap."

"I would like to bawl 'em out," Pitt persisted. "We could get somebody else to do it," he suggested.

Strange as it may appear, this proposal met with general approval. The boys could see no harm coming to themselves by such a plan, and even their uncle would not know of their connection with it. Jay, who alone fully realized the secret nature of all communications between Mr. Rydick and their uncle, hastily concluded that, so long as the proposed hint at the Auto Boys' connection with the Binski affair did not emanate from himself or his cousins, no one for whom he cared would be the wiser.

"Tell Sam Carew. He will get 'em bawled out in town," was Jay's suggestion. "We can just happen to be around and hear it, if we want to. Anyhow, it will be better than to have it

happen out here, especially if Uncle John should find it out," said he.

The plan was quickly perfected. The scheme of revenge which was to hasten their own humiliation and disgrace the Star Lake club members put into work at once. In ten minutes their uncle's gray car was carrying them to Lannington, and a meeting with Sam arranged by telephone.

The plotting cousins picked up their ally near his home and as the gray car rumbled along the South boulevard, well in the outskirts, where there would be few to see and none to hear, they made known their wishes. Very careful were the three not to tell Sam the source of their information that the Auto Boys had been seen near Binski's place.

"You don't s'pose that's where they got their money to buy that car, do you?" young Carew inquired, interestedly.

"Like as not; but you can't tell and couldn't prove it," Jay replied, cautiously. "The only thing we want to do is just have 'em hooted.

Let 'em be bawled out for fair! In two days every kid in town will be yelling it at them."

Somewhat, the proposal did not meet with a very favorable response on Sam's part. In a vague way he comprehended the serious nature of this indirect attack on the Auto Boys' good names. On the other hand, however, he was jealous, and spiteful, and, above all, too great a coward to refuse what was asked.

"I'll have some kids at work when their old ice-wagon leaves for Star Lake tomorrow afternoon," Carew agreed, at last, and the cousins voted him so good a fellow then and there that poor Sam, drinking in every word of their rank flattery, longed for more. Thus stimulated, he talked at length of the wealth and importance of his uncle in Chicago.

That more or less imaginary individual, by the way, had never yet sent on the automobile, the coming of which Sam had hundreds of times announced. He really should have been ashamed of himself.

Faithful to his agreement, vile though it was,

Sam Carew was ready the following afternoon with a half dozen street arabs when the Auto Boys' car appeared at the park entrance. From a safe distance, back among the shrubbery skirting the drive, he sent the smaller boys, in single file, walking down the gravel road past the waiting car. One after another, as they passed, they cried, "Who knows who hit Binski?" And then in chorus, "Don't you wish you had an automobile?"

On the opposite side of the street, pretending to be much attracted by the display in a store window, were the three members of the Star Lake club. With fiendish delight they saw success crown, for the time, their nefarious plot.

Phil Way and Paul Jones were in the car as it waited. As if struck a sudden blow from behind, Phil started and looked quickly about when the words of the gamins fell upon his ears. Paul did not for a second grasp the import of the cries. When he did, he colored violently.

"Oh, Phil, will we be pinched?" he whispered, in a startled way.

Phil did not answer. He noticed that a number of passersby had heard the urchins yelling out, and were looking questioningly around. But his eyes rested on three figures across the street—the cousins, whose exulting glances had not escaped his quick inspection. “Very well. We know where *that* comes from,” he said.

“What’s this they’re yelling at you?” inquired a stranger, who stepped up the next moment, presenting a round trip ticket for the Lake.

“Some foolishness or other,” Phil responded as calmly as he could; but his heart was thumping like the Thirty’s motor with the muffler off.

Paul jumped down to make room for the passenger beside Phil at the wheel. Then his eyes, also, fell upon the Star Lake cousins, and he understood the words Way had just spoken. “Shall I skip over and smash ’em?” he asked, eagerly, all in a tremble with anger.

“Not on your life! There’s something back of this. Get the papers carried and meet me the minute I drive into town,” was the quiet

but resolute answer. "We can be out to Gleason's by supper time to get Billy and Dave."

And now the six urchins came back across the street and into the park again. As before, each cried, "Who knows who hit Binski?" and then in chorus, "Don't you wish you had an automobile?"

Until the last of the little ragamuffins had passed by, Phil sat boldly upright as if he did not hear. Not a muscle did he move. When they were gone he started the car gently and slowly. He would not have shown undue haste, would not have had the appearance of wanting to escape the taunting voices, for the best town lot in Lannington.

One there was who heard the gamins' cries who stopped at once and closely noted all that happened—Jim Wells, of the Tribune staff. "Queer," thought he. "What has occasioned that, I wonder!" Then he went on to his desk in the hot, stuffy newspaper office. At the first opportunity he told the city editor about the incident.

“The very story Con Cecil fell down on!” exclaimed Mr. Abels, emphatically. “Chase after those brats and find out what they know. You’d have done it without being told if you’d been on the job!”

CHAPTER XIV

DARK CLOUDS ON THE AUTO BOYS' HORIZON

The three cousins were not to be seen when, after watching the departure of the Thirty, Paul crossed over the street. This was fortunate, perhaps, for so very hostile were young Mr. Jones' feelings that trouble of some sort would hardly have been averted had he come upon them.

Paul loitered about the neighborhood of the park, excited and impatient. If by chance he saw a policeman, as happened once or twice, he was frightened beyond measure. Surely, he thought, he and Phil and Billy and Dave would be arrested now. Though they could prove their innocence, they would have to bear the disgrace of being locked up and the mortification of appearing in court, while Sam Carew,

Freddy Perth and many others gloatingly looked on.

It was a relief when the time came to deliver the papers. The work, to a large extent, took the troubled boy's thoughts away from the subject of his worry. It also seemed to hasten the coming of Phil and the auto. That he would feel much more comfortable when he had company, Paul was certain. He could not easily be brave and confident alone. Who can, indeed?

Phil Way was doing some very earnest thinking as the Thirty hastened on to the Lake. While he awaited the time of returning, also, and on the way back to the city, was he thus occupied. "How could the Star Lake club have learned of the visit to Binski's place at that most unfortunate time?" was the substance of the question which, in one form and another, he asked himself again and again.

If Paul Jones welcomed the sight of company in his troubled thoughts, as he met Phil at the park, the latter did no less. To share the common alarm, also, with Dave and Billy and

take counsel together was now their immediate purpose and no time was lost.

Paul stopped at his sister's long enough to say he would not be home until dark, and to leave a similar message the car came to a halt at the Way residence. As he passed through the hall, after telling his mother that he and Jones were going to Gleason's and would have supper there, if they were so fortunate as to be asked, Phil was handed a letter by the maid. He slipped it into his pocket to read on the road and, presently, the auto was on the broad highway leading out past the Ravine.

Paul was at the wheel. Leaning back luxuriously in the seat beside him, very comfortable in body, if not in mind, Phil took out his letter. "Must be from Con Cecil," said he, noting the address and postmark. He spoke no further word till he had read the message through. Then with enforced calmness, though his voice trembled, he said: "Paul, we've got to face the music. Don't get rattled or scared, but the fact is, we will probably be arrested for that

172 THE AUTO BOYS' ADVENTURE

Binski murder. It's likely to come any minute."

"If - I - ever - get - another - smash - at - that - Star Lake - bunch," said Paul Jones, with slow deliberation, "I'll - fix - their - clocks - so - tight - they'll - never - know - *what hit 'em.*"

By which somewhat mixed figure, it should be understood, Paul meant to convey the thought that punishment swift and severe would be the portion of the three cousins; and not that he had any intention of engaging in the repair of time-pieces.

"That won't do any good," Phil answered soberly. "Listen to Cecil's letter," and he read:

"Dear Phil and All The Rest,—I get it straight that the cops are to nab you four almost any minute. For heaven's sake, talk it all over with your folks and—skip. Get away separately and quick as you can. There's no one to push the case very hard and in time it will blow over. My tip comes from a party who is right on the trail. Good-bye, boys. Keep

your nerve. Though I may never see you again,
I am always your friend,

Cecil."

"The strangest part of it is," Phil Way went on, "Con Cecil actually believes we killed the huckster. I've suspected it before. Now I know it, and I'd like some one to tell me where he got the crazy notion into his head. Sure, when it comes to the pinch, we haven't any thing to worry over, but it's—all-fired unpleasant," he finished protestingly.

Billy and Dave were just washing up for supper, after a busy day in the hay field, when the familiar "honk-honk" of the auto caused them to look up. The horn brought Mrs. Gleason to the door, also, and the car had scarcely stopped when she pleasantly called out, "You're just in time! Warm biscuits and honey and plenty for all. Come right in, both of you!"

The evening meal in the cool, old farmhouse passed pleasantly. The conversation was largely about the disappearance of Duck Neely, and the prospect that he would soon return, and

it was not until on the homeward way that Dave and Billy were told of the day's unhappy developments.

Dave MacLester became exceedingly despondent at once. He dreaded the ordeal that must be met, not only on his own account, but because of the embarrassment and trouble it would mean at home. Billy Worth felt scarcely less uncomfortable for the same reasons, as did also Phil and Paul, but he was not the one to throw up his hands and abandon himself to misfortune.

"There's somebody besides that cousin outfit that knows how we happened along at Binski's place," young Worth declared, thinking hard. "And who else is it so likely to be but the very parties who hit the old man on the head? They may have been hiding right close by when we were there. Nobody that we know of saw us. How else could those tin horns know anything about it?"

Just as Phil Way, alone, had all afternoon debated the very questions Billy asked, so did

all the boys discuss them now. And they agreed that the Star Lake cousins must in some way know very much more about the robbery of the huckster than they knew themselves.

"We ought to have gone to the police in the very beginning and told them everything we could," said Dave at last, blue and unhappy.

"We talked that all over at the time. We concluded we didn't need to. No use to fret now about what might have been," responded Phil Way, with sound philosophy. "It's worse than crossing bridges before you come to 'em."

"That's what I say, by thunder!" ejaculated Paul. His courage and confidence were fine when Phil and Billy were with him.

Fearing almost to find a blue-coat and brass buttons confronting them at their own little garage, the lads drove up to the green and yellow shed, basking so peacefully in the calm moonlight. As there was no one there, their courage revived rapidly. They renewed an agreement, made on the road, that for another night and day they would still say nothing of

their slight knowledge of the crime Fate seemed to try to fasten on them, and with this they separated.

If Fate itself were busy, trying to lay at the door of the Auto Boys responsibility for the huckster's death through circumstantial evidence connecting them with that tragedy, then Fate had strong assistance. For Mr. Abels was on the trail. Or, to use his own vigorous expression, the city editor was "on the job."

Mr. Abels had remembered that reward of one thousand dollars, offered by the county authorities when the whole community was stirred and incensed by the attack on the inoffensive and defenseless huckster. The reward still awaited a claimant. With the information Jim Wells had that day obtained as a clue, the city editor planned to win the prize money and do some extraordinary work for his paper at the same time.

There was no doubt in the mind of Mr. Abels now, that, had Con Cecil done his work properly, the mystery of which, thus far, only the

huckster's old white horse knew the secret, would have been cleared up long ago. He recalled perfectly the chain of evidence the young reporter had gathered. He needed little more, he thought, for even the street gamins had heard, apparently, who the lone man's assailants were. He only feared, that, since the identity of the robbers had now become such public property, he might be too late to make the first formal accusation against the four boys.

Jim Wells had been unable to find the youngsters whose taunting cries he had heard, when sent to do so, but this did not reduce Mr. Abels' ardor in any way. He was rather glad, indeed, for the fact enabled him to tell Wells to let the matter drop. He meant to have that thousand dollars for himself alone.

About the time that Phil and Paul were starting in the auto for Gleason's farm, Mr. Abels was at Knight & Wilder's garage. He strolled in casually and as casually engaged Mr. Knight in conversation. Without exciting suspicion by

appearing too much interested, he learned by degrees all he cared to know about the purchase of the Auto Boys' car. Then he frankly asked if Mr. Knight knew where the youths obtained their money.

"No, I don't," was the answer. "I have been a little curious myself. They had been working and saving and they had some cash in the bank, but some of that they brought to me they had had buried somewhere, I'll swear. Some gold pieces showed it plain as could be. They're live ones though! Fine boys, all of them!"

Just as Con Cecil had done on another occasion, Mr. Abels seized upon the statement that the Auto Boys had obtained money from a mysterious source as being most important evidence. It convinced him of their guilt. He wanted no better wedge to pry from the guilty culprits a complete confession.

Going further into the case that evening and the day following, the city editor of the Tribune found, or believed he found, many damaging facts against the chums he so relentlessly pur-

sued. True, he found, also, much good concerning them, but the latter was not grist for *his* mill. He had no feeling of animosity against the boys, it must be remembered; he bore them no ill will in any way; but he had set out with the conviction in his own mind that the four youths had committed a grave crime and he meant to prove it. Evidence unfavorable to his theory he neither wanted nor considered.

The last bit of testimony Mr. Abels felt needful, he obtained on the second afternoon of his search. It was the post-card received by the police some time before. In confidence the blue-coated captain exhibited the anonymous communication as the newspaper man just happened, apparently, to mention the Binski case. With some hesitation the officer confessed that his staff had been unable to discover whence the card came or to whom it referred.

Whereupon Mr. Abels frankly stated that he was looking up some matters in connection with the unsolved mystery. He did not, however, state how very important he considered the

postal to be, no matter from whom it came. Instead, he coolly slipped the card into his pocket, saying he wished to examine it with a magnifying glass. An ordinary reporter would not have been permitted to do this. When his superior in the army of news-gatherers did so, no objection was made.

Without going into the details of the chain of evidence Mr. Abels had pieced together, let it suffice to say that he was satisfied. The thing which most annoyed him was that he could not account for the fact that even little newsies and other small boys of the street had been, in effect, accusing the Auto Boys of robbing the huckster. Where did they get *their* information? And yet the certainty that these youngsters seemed to have their own well-founded suspicion, had its weight in persuading the city editor that his own discoveries were infallible.

With cool deliberation, alone in the Tribune editorial rooms that evening, Mr. Abels filled in a blank affidavit, solemnly charging that four certain persons, then and there being, namely,

to wit: Philip Way, William Worth, David MacLester and Paul Jones had, feloniously, unlawfully, and for purposes of robbery, struck and beaten Michael Binski with a certain weapon, namely, to wit, a hickory club, inflicting wounds which caused the death of the aforesaid Michael Binski, etc., etc.

This paper the city editor put safely away in one of the smaller drawers of his desk. In the morning he would present it to the police. Simultaneously there would appear upon the streets an extra edition of the Tribune with the story of the complete solution of the mysterious assault and robbery.

Having prepared the affidavit to back up the news to be printed in the extra, Mr. Abels, with much care to bring out effectively each sensational detail, wrote his account of the robbery and the story of the purchase of an automobile with the stolen money. The whole horrible affair, just as he imagined it all to have occurred, was pictured at length.

When his writing was finished Mr. Abels

started slowly homeward, smoking a cigar and with pleasant visions of a thousand dollars. Though the rain fell and the wind blew, though he was tired and soon was wet, as well, he was extremely well satisfied with himself. If his plan worked out, the Auto Boys would be placed under arrest about eight o'clock next morning. By that time all that he had written would be in type. Long before any other paper could learn what was going on, newsies would be crying the Tribune extra, with full particulars, in every part of the business district.

So does every man live more or less in a little world of his own. He knows and sees all that is going on in his small sphere, and maybe is often pleased, astonished, terrified or amused by what takes place. Still, if he could know and see, as easily, all that is happening all about him, but yet outside his own narrow circle, the chances are that he would be more often and more greatly astonished; more often and more greatly terrified; and, perhaps, more often and more deeply amused or pleased, as the case might be.

Mr. Abels would have been very greatly astonished, indeed, had he known what was taking place almost under his very eyes while he completed his chain of evidence; while he wrote his story; while he prepared to claim the reward for the arrest of the lone huckster's assailants; while he walked slowly homeward through the rain so complacently and so exceedingly well satisfied with himself.

CHAPTER XV

A DISCOVERY AT THE OLD HUT

A saying trite but true is, "Bad news travels fast." Within an hour after the jeering cries of the little street arabs had been directed at the Auto Boys, the report was quietly gaining circulation that the four friends were suspected of the assault on Michael Binski.

No details were mentioned. They would come later, as, like a ball of snow rolled upon the ground, the rumor grew. Like the ball of snow, also, the first report was a slight affair. Someone had merely heard the jeering taunts of the six small boys set on by Sam Carew. By the time this had been half a dozen times repeated, it amounted to the definite statement that the Auto Boys purchased their car with stolen money—Binski's money.

But none of these rumors had come to the

ears of any relative or near friend of the chums up to the morning following the conference on the way home from Gleason's. The four lads met, as their custom of late had been, at the little garage under the elms. Phil and Billy were to go to help Tyler Gleason today. Dave and Paul would take care of passengers to and from Star Lake.

Frequent changes of work was one of the rules Phil Way had promulgated for the Young American Contract Company. It was his idea, also, that where two worked together, the same members of the little company should not be coupled up for more than a day or two at a time. So were jealousies or other possible friction prevented.

Feeling much more cheerful in the brightness of the early morning, and much more inclined to disregard the danger which, only the preceding evening, seemed so near, the friends made the run out to Gleason's right merrily. Only one plan, having in view the possibility that all four might be under arrest ere night,

did they make. This was that after returning from the morning trip to the Lake, Paul and Dave should drive out to Gleason's for a talk during the noon hour. Any news bearing upon the trouble threatening could thus be considered in general counsel.

The haying on Tyler Gleason's farm, thanks to the willing hands that helped him, was practically finished. One small field of heavy timothy only remained to be cut. Hither Mr. Gleason went with the mowing machine this morning. The grass would not be sufficiently cured for raking until afternoon, so Phil and Billy were set to hoeing corn. They rather liked the change of work, and cut away at the many weeds vigorously. But the rows were long and the sun was hot.

"Take two apiece clear across, this time," said Billy, after they had once worked the length of the field and back, "then we will rest a bit in the shade at the lower end of the lot."

Boy fashion, Billy easily persuaded himself that the hoeing of the two rows at a time fully

justified a little relaxation when they were finished.

"If it's a good thing to take two at a time now, it's a good thing to take two every time," said Phil Way, refusing to make a bargain with his conscience. "I don't care, though, if we do rest a little. Reckon we'll get just as much done in the end."

The foot of the cornfield bordered the woods above the Ravine. The Retreat of the Forest Rangers was not far away, for the hut stood on that side of the valley nearest the waving green blades.

"Might skip over and have a look, for just half a minute," proposed Billy Worth. The lads had been talking of the Retreat while they worked. As together they found seats on the old rail fence at the lower end of the field, the suggestion was offered. It would be an interesting way of spending the breathing spell the two had so unanimously voted themselves.

"What's the use though?" responded Phil. "We'd only get to talking about that money we

lost, then more than found again, and a lot of other business that we agreed, a little while ago, not to mention any more till noon."

"No, we won't. Come on," the other urged and, liking the suggestion very well himself, Phil yielded and both boys ran through the woods together. They soon came upon an old pathway of the cattle, which led directly to the top of the bluff above the hillside cave or hut,—it was hardly the one thing nor yet the other, it will be remembered—and soon the two came to the identical log beneath which the old newspaper had been found some time before.

By this landmark Phil recognized the location of the Retreat, here hidden from view, except if one looked very closely, and down the steep descent he went. Billy rapidly followed him.

"Looks as if there had been somebody here again," said Phil, noting how the grass and the undergrowth had been trampled.

"I'd like to know who in creation it is that's prowling around so much," ejaculated Billy Worth with indignation.

Phil took the key from its resting place under a little stone on a ledge of the roughly constructed wall, and opened the padlock that secured the door.

"If they aren't monkeying with any of our stuff, I suppose we can't complain," he said, "and I guess they are not, at that," he added, stepping inside. "Here are the axes, the saw, the cups and pans, and there's Dave's boxing-gloves! He ought not to have left them here!"

"And here's the wash-basin full of dirty water!" exclaimed Billy vigorously.

"None of our bunch ever left that there. We've always thrown out the water and turned the basin up to keep from rusting. You know we have, Phil!"

"Yes, somebody's been here," Phil answered, indifferently taking the boxing-gloves down from the rough mantel above the fire-place. "And here's something else!" he added, in a far livelier tone. "It's a letter!"

"Gee, I hope it ain't from Con Cecil," Billy almost groaned; but he laughed too. "If some-

body's been leaving such things, though, we'll find out who's been poking around here, all right."

"I should hope so! The letter's for us, boy!" replied Phil with pretended superiority.

"Great Scott! It *ain't* from Cecil, is it?" Billy cried, in real seriousness this time.

"Guess not. It's one of the envelopes we had here in the winter. All our names are on it," Phil returned with some excitement. "Let's see!" He broke the seal and took out a closely-written, thumb-marked sheet. Together the two boys read the writing:

"I told you not to blab about that money I put in your box under the stone and you done what I said. Maybe you thought it was some of Binski's doe but it wassent. I keep thinking all the time you boys reckoned it was me that held up the huckster but so help me I didn't do it. It was me that took some of your money out of that box, then put it back and some more to it. From up on the bank over the hut I seen you put your money box under the stone but the ree-

son I took some of it was to win more and I done it. The man I got it from was trying to leed me on to get Tyler Gleason to play the same game he played with me and trim him right. I know now that is why he let me win. So I would have come out all right but I thought I could win some more and I tried it with some of them Lannington gamblers that the same man knew. They skun me bad. Then when I would not get Gleason to play the game that had been showed to me the party would get mad and throw out hints that it was me that got Binski's money and he could prove it because of money I had to gamble with in Lannington. But that same party is the one that got Binski's pile himself because he didn't have much money before that and afterward he had a stack, and besides this I seen him going into the woods towards Binskeys that same night. Still he woant let me bee and comes here to your hut and like a big fool I meet him here and he wants me to help trim Gleason by him letting on he wants to leese lands for oil and then play his skin card

game. He skipped out mighty quick the day you boys come out in your auto and over to the hut and was afraid you would see him. If I could get some more money I would let him play the game on me again and win like I did before. I thought you would put some more in the box but you didn't, because I have looked. I can't tell how I have been pestered with that man talking sly about how Binski got it which job he done himself and I know it. You boys have been squire with me and I wanted you to know who took your money and put it back and that there wassent any of it Binskeys money either befoar I left because I can't stand that man and I have so wrote him. He has got me skared bad when there ain't nothing to be skared of and I am afraid of him. I quit Gleason last night and you boys will have to help him out till he gets somebody. So I will say thank you for the use of your bunk in this hut and the crackers I got. They was purty musty. So good-bye.

Duck Neely."

"By jolly! I know who that man was!" ex-

claimed Billy Worth, and he put his finger impressively on Neely's closely scrawled letter, where the words "that man" occurred.

"Great guns! It was Duck Neely that got into our treasure chest! That's the interesting thing!" cried Phil Way. "The loony, though! He's scared half to death over nothing! And *we* had no kick coming, because of what he got from us! He needn't have been afraid on that account."

"Sure, it's interesting to know that Neely was the one that swiped our coin, but gosh-all-fish-hooks, Phil, don't you see now who robbed Binski? That man we saw in the woods when we cut cross-lots to try to collect that money Binski owed us. That's who!"

"Billy Worth, *I* know something," Phil answered impressively and slowly. "The man we saw up on the north bluff at the Lake that day is the same one who was walking off through the woods, back of Binski's, the very Saturday night we went there! I *said* I had seen him before. Now I know where!"

"Yes sir! *I remember*, and I said so, too! That's who it was, all right. Now if he *was* the same man Neely talks about! But that's what we can't be sure of. He might have seen a dozen men that we didn't see!"

"And a sight of good it would do us if we did know," responded Phil soberly. "Every step we take, lately, seems to drag us into that Binski affair. I wish his truck had spoiled before ever we touched it."

For a longer time than Tyler Gleason would have liked, the boys discussed Duck Neely's letter and its remarkable contents. They searched the hut, also, hoping to find some other evidence of the hired man's suspicion concerning the robbery. Nothing could they discover, however, and, suddenly remembering the corn-field, they made double-quick time back to their hoes, and renewed the battle with the weeds, under the scorching sun.

"Just the samey," declared Billy Worth, with a vigorous slash at one tall rag-weed, "it looks mighty queer! If those tin horns at the Lake

knew about our having been at Binski's, as we thought they did the other day, where did they find it out? Why, that man we saw there told them. How would he know anything about it if he didn't know something about the robbery himself? And we know we saw him in the woods that night!

"Goodness, Bill, you'll be claiming that thousand dollars reward next!" Phil laughingly exclaimed. "But," he added, quite soberly, "reward or no reward, if we could prove all that you have just now said we ought to tell the police, at least. I'd like to talk to Dan Dilworth. If there's anything in the law that *he* don't know, nobody does."

"Blame it all, if we only knew that the man we saw is the man Neely was afraid of, and the one he accuses," was the puzzled response.

With so much to occupy their thoughts, the two boys found the welcome sound of the farmhouse dinner bell in their ears before they expected it. Hungry, and very ready for the noon-day rest they undoubtedly were, but their

greatest interest in the hour at hand was the meeting with Dave and Paul and a discussion of the morning's discovery.

The Thirty rolled smoothly into Mr. Gleason's drive while Billy and Phil were still at the table. Yet they managed to finish dinner without actually swallowing their food whole, though their noticeable haste really caused the kind-hearted Mrs. Gleason quite serious uneasiness. It had been a long time since her own boys were at home.

On a weather-beaten store box, under the apple tree, the Auto Boys talked over Duck Neely's letter, his confession of the theft from the treasure chest and his suspicion concerning the mysterious tragedy.

Paul Jones could scarcely find words to express his astonishment when he heard the news. Dave MacLester, though no less interested, was naturally less demonstrative.

So busy were all with the solution of the mystery of the Forest Ranger money, and the "Don't-blab-it" note, also with the question

whether Tyler Gleason should be told at once of Neely's letter, that for some time nothing was asked or mentioned regarding the morning trip to the Lake. Immediately when the latter subject was brought to notice, however, Paul's ever-ready tongue was started afresh. What he said, too, proved for once to be highly important.

"Peter Kit Carson Washington Jackson Wild Bill Whaley told us something this morning that shows one thing plain enough," said he. "He told us those three Indians wanted him to holler at us, 'How about old Binski?' or something like that. It shows that they put those kids up to yell like they did down by the park yesterday, just as we thought."

"That goes to prove that the man we saw there is the one who was in the woods when we were going to Binski's," said Billy. "He's the one that told them, all right! Who else could it have been?"

"That man—that man! By thunder!" ejaculated Paul, with an earnest, studious frown.

"Why, that's the man who came out of the Ravine, and got into the auto with that Star Lake bunch the day I was waiting up there on the road in our machine! Sure it was! I remember now, just as well!"

"Then that's the man Duck Neely tells about," almost shouted Billy Worth in his excitement. "Don't you know how the letter reads that he skipped out pretty quick one day when we had the car out, and were going over to the hut?"

"I know it's the same man, all right. It's the man we saw up on the bluff," Paul repeated, with excited earnestness.

"Say, this is getting warm," said Phil Way with a smile, yet very seriously too. "We've been playing detectives without knowing it. Now that we do know it, we better play strong."

"Lookin' like rain! We must get part o' that timothy in, anyway, an' the rest bunched up, boys," called Tyler Gleason from the barn.

CHAPTER XVI

MID WIND AND RAIN

Tyler Gleason's amateur farm-hands responded to his call less willingly than they had ever done before. The desire to follow up the day's developments was keen. Interest in other subjects had fallen far below par. To postpone all action concerning their discoveries, and their suspicion concerning the author of the tragedy at the little, old house on the lonely road, seemed almost too much to yield.

If Phil Way had said the word, all four boys would have jumped into the auto and sped away at once. But Phil said no such thing, and you know him well enough now to look for no such suggestion from him. What he did propose was:

"It sure is going to rain and there's all that timothy out," he said. "Dave, it's your turn

with the papers. Get through early and meet Paul. Get out here in the machine just as soon as you can—both of you. Billy and I will arrange to get away in good season and—Well, we will decide what we better do about everything when we meet again. Come on, Bill. I'll bet you're glad enough to change a hoe for a pitchfork."

"And good old ginger water right off the ice every time we bring a load to the barn!" Billy laughed.

Together he and Phil hastened to help Mr. Gleason hitch the big Percherons to the hay wagon, while Dave and Paul rolled comfortably off to town in that best of friends, the ever ready automobile.

As a weather prophet Mr. Gleason was, on this occasion, a success. Billy Worth said he was a "wonder." Be this as it may, the fact remains that before three o'clock the sky was overcast with thick, black clouds and a heavy downpour seemed ready to begin at any mo-

ment. The wind and rumbling thunder grew louder and louder.

How the two boy farmers worked now! The timothy had all been raked and two large loads hauled to the barn. There would be too little time to draw more before the storm, and all hands turned to the task of cocking up the hay still in the field.

With perspiration streaming down his cheeks, Phil was at one windrow, Billy at another, Mr. Gleason at a third. The boys were racing with each other and against the farmer himself. The old gentleman was quick and strong and made his fork move fast, but he was no match for the younger two. With a glad shout, at last, they turned to help him finish his row, and completed the work just as the first big drops came down.

In one way the coming of the storm was fortunate for Phil and Billy. Mr. Gleason, very glad to have accomplished so much before the rain, asked his wife for an early supper and did all his chores earlier than usual. The boys were free to go the moment the auto arrived,

therefore, and in good season they were speeding over the wet and muddy road to the city.

The rain had ceased for the time but the dense, black clouds showed not a break anywhere. Like the heavy clouds which, in a figurative sense, had been gathering steadily above the heads of the Auto Boys, they gave every sign that the storm was not over.

And the night was coming on dark and threatening. The melancholy murmur of the wind intensified the twilight gloom and, somehow, imparted a feeling of fear and sorrow strangely mingled.

More and more rapidly the shadows deepened. Danger they little saw, and adventure they little suspected lay close before the young friends. And though the early darkness and moaning wind did impress them as with some unknown and dreadful thing impending, they scarcely realized the cause: They only knew their usually buoyant spirits were weighted down as if by some great anxiety they could not name.

"Say what you blame please," remarked Dave MacLester, as the quartette sat talking in the little garage, "men have been actually hanged where there was nothing but circumstantial evidence against 'em, and not as much, at that, as they could make out against us this very night."

The storm, the unusual gloom and a reaction following the excitement of the day's discoveries, had, as has been said, put all the boys in a most drooping mood. The weight of the secret which, foolishly, they had so long borne alone, was telling, too. Adding much to the burden upon their thoughts, also, was a report Paul had heard in the afternoon. "It's all over town that your gang laid old Binski out," a boy had whispered to him. "Another lady at our house told my mother so when they thought I didn't hear."

It was following a discussion of Paul's really alarming report that Dave spoke the words that have been mentioned, in the most unhappy tone imaginable.

"Now, this is never going to do," announced Phil Way, at last. "We're all of us getting like Duck Neely—scared half to death over nothing. Where's all the nerve we had this noon, anyway? Hang it all, we've got almost sure evidence against that man at the Lake if we only knew how to go about making use of it. That's where the trouble is. Let's go and talk with Dan Dilworth. It's better than scaring and worrying all our own folks before there's any call for it."

"Me for you, Phil," cried Paul Jones, brightening instantly, but with a tremor of uneasiness in his tone too.

Then he added a vigorous remark to the effect that it would do no good to masticate any worn-out or discarded bit of cloth or fabric. His words, however, as they certainly could have nothing to do with the subject under discussion, will not need be repeated. Let it suffice to say that he declared a second time that the act of mastication mentioned was of no use whatever;

in which. it would seem, he was very probably right.

To the law office of Mr. Dilworth—for that was where they found the aged attorney to be—the four boys went. By letting Phil serve as spokesman for all, with only such interruptions as the others could not restrain, the lawyer was soon placed in possession of the boys' own knowledge of the assault and robbery and their reasons for suspecting a certain person.

“Well!” exclaimed Mr. Dilworth in his gruff voice, so very gruff on this occasion, indeed, it almost made the boys jump, “I didn’t exactly expect this, but I am not greatly surprised. You are sure you would know this man if you saw him again? You are sure your description is actual, nothing imaginary about it?”

As to both these points all four boys answered very positively in the affirmative.

“Is the fellow still at the Lake?”

This question they could not so readily answer, but they thought he was, they said.

“We don’t go much on what one may *think* in

the law," said Mr. Dilworth. "Can you find out if he is there?"

"Sure!" exclaimed Billy Worth, and, stepping to the telephone, he was soon talking to that loyal friend, Pete Whaley, at the Brush hotel.

"Don't forget to impress that party with the fact that he is not to mention the nature of your inquiry," growled Mr. Dilworth, quite savagely—at least his voice sounded so, little as he really intended it should.

"The man is at the hotel tonight. Pete Whaley won't say a word, you bet," Billy repeated as he hung up the telephone receiver.

"Don't say 'you bet' to me. I don't. But we will pass that for now," was the gruff, old-fashioned lawyer's response. Then opening his office door, he called: "Squire, step over here a minute!"

The squire promptly appeared from his own dim, poorly furnished quarters across the hall. Like Dan Dilworth, he was old-fashioned and had the old-fashioned habit of spending the

early part of every evening at his desk in the old-fashioned building where both had old-fashioned offices. His full name and title were Isaac Golden, Justice of the Peace. He was, perhaps, no older than Mr. Dilworth in years, but he showed his age much more. His figure was thin and his gray beard almost too scant to cover his chin. His hair grew only in a fringe extending from the back of one ear to the back of the other.

"Did you call me, Dan?" the squire inquired in a voice as thin as his own body. His high, sharp notes were in marked contrast to the deep, gruff tones of the lawyer.

"Sit down, squire," said Mr. Dilworth, making no other answer to the question asked. "Here's a case that might just as well start in your court as any other. We want a warrant for the arrest of Robert Rydick on the charge of suspicion. We want your constable and we want him to get the aforesaid Rydick into jail forthwith. Tonight he is at Star Lake. Where he may be tomorrow will depend very largely on how promptly your man can move."

"On suspicion?" squeaked Squire Golden, curiously.

"On suspicion," answered Mr. Dilworth calmly, but still gruffly. "Bob Rydick, card-sharp, thief, and high-grade crook, right-hand man to John Sacker, who will bear watching, is wanted on suspicion."

"Of what?" the justice inquired just a little timidly.

"Murder," growled the old lawyer. "I have considered all along that if the police knew as much about him as I now, they would have had him locked up before this. Now my neighbors, here, come with direct evidence against him. Call Constable Crill, Squire. We must move rapidly, now the machinery is in motion! I said, twenty years ago, when Robert Rydick swindled his only sister out of her share of the little property left them, that his last spark of manhood was gone. His whole career has proved it. He has traveled a hard road, and this is not his first serious offense, though extremely likely to be his last."

Squire Golden made no comment, but telephoned at once for Constable Crill.

"We can take him to the Lake in the car," suggested Billy Worth, referring to the officer.

"And bring that man back with him and us? Goodness no!" exclaimed Phil, shrugging his shoulders.

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Dilworth with such a growl that Paul's cheery exclamation, "Why, cert," faded into a half-choked whisper, and unconsciously he stepped behind his chair.

The details were soon arranged. The boys hurried away to get the auto, and leave word at their homes that they were going on a necessary run to the Lake.

"Phil Way," exclaimed the maid, as that young gentleman stepped into the house, "sure, someone has telephoned for you three times. You are to call Knight & Wilder's garridge right away."

"Shucks!" ejaculated Phil beneath his breath, fearing to find someone wishing to be

taken to the resort. But he called up Knight & Wilder at once.

"Just a minute," said the boy who answered, and very soon there came in guarded tones: "Come down here, Phil, quick as you can. Don't lose a second. You know who's talking?"

"Yes," the lad answered, trembling, for he would have recognized Con Cecil's voice anywhere. Then, "I'll be there in a few minutes," he said.

Paul and Billy were already on hand when Phil reached the shed under the elms, busily preparing the car for work. Both were so excited that everything seemed to go wrong. Phil, scarcely less so, still managed to keep control of himself, and presently down the alley the Thirty went gliding through the mud and darkness.

As pre-arranged, Dave MacLester was picked up at the corner near his home. He was bundled up in a great overcoat, which he promptly took off and stowed out of the way in the car, when the machine had passed beyond the rays of the nearest electric light.

Phil told the news that Cecil was at Knight & Wilder's as soon as all four were together. What could he want? If just to go to the Lake, he could be accommodated only in case he did not care to return at once. If he desired to warn his friends of danger from the police, then they would have something to say, in answer, which might surprise him some.

It chanced that the young newspaper man had in mind exactly the two subjects the Auto Boys discussed. He greeted them pretty soberly. "I've got to go to Star Lake," he said, taking them to one side, "but I couldn't go without first seeing you chaps. You know they're looking for you, don't you?"

"Who?" asked Phil Way.

"A plain-clothes man from the local force is after you this very night, or will be. Are you ready for him, or why is it you have not done as I suggested about going away?" The young man spoke rapidly, but very earnestly.

"Cecil, do you actually think we were the

ones who did up the huckster?" inquired Billy Worth earnestly

"No time for that line of talk, Billy," the reporter answered hurriedly, yet kindly, "but if that is your play, you can count on it that I don't know a thing. Why, the tip I got that caused me to write that last letter came from this same detective! He thought I had found something, sometime back, and came clear to Westerfield to see me."

"Oh, look here, Con, we no more—" began Phil protestingly.

"Of course you didn't! I don't know a thing, never suspected a thing, and I mustn't either. Better not tell me a word more," he continued nervously, "I don't want to know anything. So, to change the subject, I did think I'd ask you to take me out to the Lake—another party and myself. Of course you won't want to now, but you'll be surprised, I reckon, to know what I'm after. We're going to get Sacker, the uncle of those Star Lake club boys. Got him dead to rights on all kinds of crooked business

and a cop is going with me to land him. The whole police force has been looking for him but it's your cousin Dudley who gets him, after all. We're on the way, and here's our car now."

The conversation had taken place just outside Knight & Wilder's establishment. A big touring car came chugging out of the wide doors, with Mr. Wilder at the wheel and an officer, closely buttoned up in a raincoat, in the tonneau.

With a quickly whispered, "Hope you fellows are playing safe, but I'm afraid of it, and—and worried," the reporter stepped aboard and was gone. The rain was falling steadily now and the wind moaned more ominously than before.

CHAPTER XVII

“THE END OF THE STRING, AT LAST”

“Throw in the high, Phil! Great guns, we’ve got to get to the Lake as soon as Cecil does, or it’ll be too late,” said Billy Worth with haste and excitement. “The minute a cop shows up, our man’s going to skip. And what do you think of Cecil and a policeman being after ‘uncle?’ What do you *think* of it?”

Instantly the auto sped forward. The strong probability that an officer’s appearance would, indeed, cause the man Dan Dilworth had called Bob Rydick to go into hiding, even though the blue-coat were not in search of him, all the boys realized and they braced themselves for a swift ride through the mud and rain.

Constable Crill was in waiting at the foot of the stairway leading up to Squire Golden’s and Mr. Dilworth’s offices, and those two men of the law were with him.

In a low, rapid tone Phil told of the car that had gone ahead and the purpose of the reporter and the officer with him. It was the intention, he said, to land the constable at the Brush hotel at the same time the others arrived.

"So Sacker's come to the end of his string at last," said Mr. Dilworth in a low tone. His voice sounded far away, as if he were speaking only to himself. "The end of his string at last," he repeated solemnly. "I told you boys to let his young kinsmen alone. I am glad to know you've done so," he added, as if coming suddenly out of a dream. But now the car was ready.

"I will be waiting for you, Crill," Squire Golden said. "I do think you ought to have help, but if *you* don't—"

Even as he spoke, the Thirty was well under way. Again came the splash of the wheels over the wet streets, again the rush of the damp wind, amidst the slowly falling rain. Wildly exciting was the music in the ears of the Auto Boys.

A youth, holding an umbrella in such a way that he failed to see the glare of the car's lamps, stepped quickly back as the machine sped over the crossing where he was about to pass.

"Sam Carew!" ejaculated Billy to Phil, at the wheel beside him.

"Humph! Phil Way's gang!" commented the young gentleman, who imagined that in another minute he might have been run over. The next instant it dawned upon Sam's mind, also, that there was a fifth passenger in the auto and that that person was none other than Ed Crill, the constable. Sam knew him well and had seen him plainly as the car passed beneath a street lamp, though he had not at once taken notice. That the officer's presence, and the fact that the machine was traveling like the wind toward Star Lake, might signify a great deal, came to the boy's thoughts by degrees. If he reached his conclusion slowly, however, it at least was very definite in the end, and with a sudden emphasis he exclaimed: "They're after the Waldo boys and Pitt Sagger!"

Five minutes later Sam Carew was at a convenient telephone station calling for the Brush hotel, then for Jay Waldo.

"Looks as if they were going to make trouble for you to pay for that 'bawling out,'" said Sam after telling what he had seen. "Likely they're going to have you arrested for speeding or something."

"They'll be good and sorry they ever tackled us before *we're* through with 'em," Jay Waldo answered. Little he thought how soon—oh, how very soon, the bubble of his vanity and arrogance was to be pierced. Little he thought that in his dingy law office old Dan Dilworth sat at that very moment thinking, "The end of his string at last—at last. It never fails. They all come to it."

The rainy night caused most of the guests at the Brush hotel to be in their rooms at an early hour. Pitt Sagger and Martin Waldo were in bed when Jay returned upstairs, whence he had been summoned to the telephone. In a low voice he told the substance of Sam's mes-

sage. There was no doubt in his mind that it was for himself and his cousins that the officer was coming.

"Only thing for it is skiddoo or tell Uncle about it and get him to go our bail," said Jay badly frightened, despite the bravado of the answer he had given Sam.

The latter course was decided on. Martin and Pitt quickly dressed to accompany Jay to the billiard room downstairs where Mr. Sagger was engaged in a game with Landlord Brush. In the hall, however, the three met their uncle on the way to his room. Mr. Rydick, the gas and oil expert, was with him.

In a breath, to have the ordeal over with as quickly as possible, the cousins told him what they had heard and what they expected.

Instead of answering them, Mr. Sagger looked at Mr. Rydick. The latter had turned pale.

"If I could only get to Westerfield on that fast train," he said in a low tone, but with an assumed air of business, to hide his alarm.

"Why do you believe these boys are bringing a constable to arrest you?" inquired Mr. Sagger harshly, turning to Jay Waldo.

"Sam Carew saw them and he thought may be that was what it meant," was the answer.

"Go to your room and stay there, all of you," was the sharp command in reply. "I'll look after this constable myself. If they should send up for you, let them wait."

"It's them four boys' doings. I've been afraid of it ever since that day they saw us back there on the bluff," said Mr. Rydick, hoarsely, when the two men were alone. "Them nephews of yours know a sight too much, too, and they've been blowing it around. I got that straight in Lannington to-day. It was just that that I've been waiting to tell you about."

"Bob Rydick," said the other coldly, "if you would keep your own mouth half as tight as my nephews do theirs, there would be a great improvement over your present methods. I tell you their being here is because it suits me that

they should be. It is the excuse for *my* being here.

“Ordinarily I would not condescend to mention to you a reason for anything I do, but now you know why I intend they shall stay. And mark you this: I’ll get you to Lannington at once, and you leave there at once, and if you come back—hear me, Rydick—if you come back, on any pretext whatever, until I send for you, I’ll put you where you would have been a score of years ago if I hadn’t kept you out. Now, remember! Come! My machine is ready. We will leave the lamps unlit and by careful work can meet that other car along the road and they’ll never know it.”

Pausing only long enough to get a stormcoat and suitable headgear, John Sacker, alias Sagger, a lawyer in name but a crook, gambler and thief by profession, slipped out of a side door of the Brush hotel, in company with the wretched creature whom he had caused to take the chief risk in all his criminal operations and

whom he held always between himself and the danger of discovery.

The wind and rain and darkness of the night would, Sacker believed, make easy the task of getting Rydick beyond immediate reach. He was by no means certain that the young proprietors of the auto passenger service and the constable coming with them were in search of the man who served him as a cat's paw; but if the danger served to frighten Rydick into staying away from Star Lake, he would do his part to make the latter's scare as complete as possible.

Meanwhile, traveling at good speed along the muddy road, Mr. Wilder with Con Cecil by his side, and the silent officer of the law behind, reached the drive running from the main road to the Brush hotel at Star Lake just as a car, whose lights they had noticed in the rear, came close up to them. Mr. Wilder had slackened speed a great deal, to make the turn, and it was necessary for the machine which followed to put brakes on severely or suffer a collision.

This Phil Way did, for it was the Thirty, with

the Auto Boys and Constable Crill aboard, which had overtaken the first machine. But so suddenly were the brakes applied that the car skidded violently. As it turned almost cross-wise of the road, its lamps shed their glare far across the shrubby-dotted lawn. Plainly revealed against a background of low foliage, amid which it seemed to crouch, was a gray automobile and two men seated in it.

"There they are!" Billy Worth burst forth in loud excitement.

Even as he spoke the gray machine with lamps still unlit leaped forward, made the turn into the roadway with a terrific slide-slip, and started up the hill.

Con Cecil had also seen what the Thirty's lamps revealed, and gave his directions at once. With all possible rapidity Mr. Wilder turned and his car shot past the Thirty almost before Phil had reversed to back onto the main road.

Thus began the race of such dreadful termination. With wheels slipping and spinning, none of the three cars made great speed in

climbing the slope from the Lake. The gray car kept a strong lead over Wilder's machine and the Thirty, with its heavier load, lost ground somewhat on the upward grade. But when the more level road was reached all three sped forward madly

With a splendid response to the accelerator, the Thirty slowly gained on the car ahead. Phil was driving. Above the roar of the wind and the fine, dashing rain still filling the air, he shouted to the constable and his companions: "Watch the roadsides! He will jump and get off in the dark before we know it!"

Of course he was not heard, but it mattered little. There was no danger of the thing he mentioned. To leap from a car going at such a pace would be madness.

"Halt! Halt, or I shoot!" came indistinctly a shout from Wilder's car. It was the officer in the tonneau, standing upright, holding on desperately with his left hand while his right gripped a revolver. "Halt, I say!" came again the harsh cry, barely audible in the terrific rush

of wind and rain, and the swift grinding of the wheels through the mud and water

Whether the fleeing men in the gray machine could hear the warning may well be doubted. Certainly they gave no heed. They were crowding their car to its fullest extent, but gaining very little, if any, upon their pursuers. Then a shot rang out in the rain-filled air, adding to the excitement. As if from far away the sound reached the ears of the boys in the rear car.

It was the officer with Cecil who had fired, but he accomplished nothing. The fugitives' car did not for an instant slacken speed, but on and on through the darkness, with but the outlines of the road to guide the way, plunged madly, furiously forward, and on and on. Keeping always within a little distance of the gray machine Mr. Wilder failed, however, to gain an inch. The Thirty, despite its load, kept well up. Every motor was developing the last ounce of power and speed of which it was capable.

It was as if the race were for life or death. Sacker knew now that Rydick was in danger.

Perhaps he even thought he was not himself quite safe. Hardly would he have risked the chance of accident by such furious driving through the storm and darkness, otherwise. And on and on the gray car plunged, slipping from side to side most dangerously, but speeding on and on, while in swift pursuit came the two that followed.

But on the rushing wind, in the darkness and storm, Death was also riding—riding to an awful victory.

A blinding flash of lightning was followed by a crash of thunder, long and loud; and mingled with the awful sound, that seemed to shake the very earth, came the terrific shriek of a locomotive's whistle. Bearing down upon the crossing, just ahead, was the W. E. & N. Chicago Limited roaring forward at sixty miles an hour.

Did they fail to hear the warning blast, fail to see the swiftly moving, gleaming lights? Or did they hope to make the crossing ahead of the train—a thing their pursuers obviously could not do,—and so gain enough, while the latter

slackened speed, to draw away from them? No one knows.

The awful impact as the mighty locomotive struck the gray car just back of the forward seat, threw the automobile and its occupants into the air as a child might throw a toy. The machine fell fifty feet away, a broken, tangled mass of wood and steel. The two men were found beyond it,—Sacker bleeding and insensible, Rydick still breathing and conscious, but with the mark of death stamped indelibly upon his ghastly pale and pain-drawn features.

In his dingy office, listening to the patter of the rain and the murmur of the wind, sweeping in at his open window, Dan Dilworth said time and again, a tinge of melancholy in his low gruff tones: "The end of his string. John Sacker at the end of his string at last; and Rydick with him."

It was true. As they had sown, so did they reap. To the end of the world the consequence is inevitable.

The rain was still falling when the injured

men were carried, one from Mr. Wilder's car, the other from the Thirty, into the general hospital. But as the Auto Boys left Squire Golden and Mr. Dilworth, after reporting the result of their search for the suspected assailant of Michael Binski, the sky was slowly clearing.

Suddenly there appeared a rift through which the moonlight came in all its wealth of silvery beauty. And even as the clouds, now broken, moved rapidly from view, and the darkness gave place to a calm and tranquil light, so did the storm long threatening the four friends lift and pass over. Alarm and danger were at an end and they were unharmed.

In the very room in the hospital where the humble huckster's life went out, Robert Rydick, confidence man and common crook, confessed himself as the man's murderer. He had not meant to kill he said, but—He obtained comparatively little money for his deed, less than five hundred dollars. When he read how the police had seized upon the hickory stick, which he had seen one of four boys carrying, as

the weapon with which the huckster was struck down, he tried to further the officers' interest in that false clue by sending an anonymous card.

Yet Rydick's confession to the authorship of the Binski tragedy was hardly so important as the numerous confessions in which he involved John Sacker, alias Sagger, now shown to be an even greater criminal than himself. The fleecing of Farmer Spindle, near Westerfield, was but one of many crimes of which the pretended lawyer was the originator, and though Rydick did the principal work, the other received the lion's share of the gains.

Backed by the positive identification of Sacker by the farmer victim, as a result of the visit of Con Cecil to Star Lake, accompanied by Mr. Spindle in disguise, a short time before, the truth of these confessions was fairly established.

A copy of the Westerfield Leader of the morning following the flight of the two criminals

from Star Lake came into the hands of Mr. Abels, city editor of the Lannington Tribune as he sat at an early breakfast the morning after the storm. He was thinking of the sensational news soon to appear in a Tribune extra. It was the occasion of his being astir in advance of his usual time.

But startling headlines on the first page of the Westerfield paper now caught the city editor's eye. It was the story of the crash of the Chicago Limited and the automobile on the Star Lake crossing, the story of the confession of Rydick in the Binski affair, the story of the arrest of John Sacker and of the identification of the supposed lawyer as a criminal of the worst type.

All the news he quickly read. In chagrin and disappointment he saw his own great sensation fade to nothing and his grasp on the Binski reward prove a grasping of the air. But the limit of his endurance was reached when he saw Con Cecil's name signed to the three-column dispatch.

"A little more coffee, sir?" said the waiter, obsequiously.

"No!" thundered Mr. Abels.

For a week Jim Wells and others of his staff feared and trembled and wondered. They guessed, too, the reason of the city editor's irritability, and knew they were not far wrong.

To the Auto Boys one of the strangest features of the developments following that thrilling ride through the rain and storm and its startling ending was the extraordinary astonishment of Con Cecil when told of Rydick's confession concerning the death of the huckster.

The boys had gone home long before the confession was made, but Cecil, staying to the last, to wire every part of the news to his paper, learned of the man's admissions early. Without a moment's loss of time he telephoned to Phil, Billy and Dave in succession, midnight though it was, to offer his congratulations. He tried to reach Paul, too, but there was no telephone at his home.

In Mr. Cecil's mind the certain guilt of the

boys and their consequent danger had been so real that his delight in finding himself only a victim of a terrible dream, due to his own too active imagination, was truly unlimited. The reward of three hundred dollars for the arrest of Sacker, the swindler, and even his great success on the large city paper, didn't please him one-tenth as much.

Before the sun of another day had set Rydick died,—died, holding the hand of the forgiving sister, the stealing of whose inheritance had been his first great crime, and the one which, at the end, he seemed to repent the most.

When John Sacker was able to leave the hospital, officers took him to Westerfield. Unable to obtain bondsmen, he lay for months in jail, while his ill-gotten property was largely consumed in his efforts to escape the punishment he so thoroughly merited. The sentence of ten years in the penitentiary, at last meted out to him, was considered little enough.

Pitt Sagger, or Sacker, as his real name was, and Jay and Martin Waldo lived riotously at

their uncle's home while his property lasted. They were forced to other quarters at last. In the end all three were dependent upon the charity of John Sacker's aged housekeeper, the one friend who stood by him to the last, for even his nephews refused to bid him good-bye when he was taken away by the sheriff.

Sam Carew's relations with the now defunct Star Lake club in time became generally known. He had long since quarreled with Fred Perth and Percy Hassett and now he was without a chum, as he truly deserved to be.

Kind-hearted "Uncle" Joe Brush was shocked and amazed beyond description to find the Mr. "Sagger," of whom he thought so well, to be so little deserving of his good opinion. For weeks following that awful night he was so depressed, his best friends would hardly have recognized him. Pete Whaley was his constant attendant, however, and when, one day, the colored boy told of the trouncing the three cousins received on the north shore of the lake, Uncle

Joe broke into a hearty laugh and from that moment was quite himself again.

It was not until the second day after the night of the storm and excitement that the Thirty again carried the four boys to Gleason's farm. What was their surprise to see Duck Neely there, at work, as usual.

"I can't make it out nohow," said Tyler Gleason. "Duck's back and like his own self ag'in, except that he's forever readin' over an' over all the newspapers say about that Rydick and Sacker, an' sayin' 'I knowed it!' Of course he didn't, but there ain't no harm in it, I s'pose."

It lightened the hearts of the boys greatly to find the hired man in his place again, contented and happy. Their last cause for worry and the last of their mysteries was now removed. Gayly they drove through the warmth and brightness of the summer evening as the sun went down.

One incident the Auto Boys had not foreseen occurred a fortnight later, reminding them once

again of the terrible affair with which they had so innocently been connected. A check for one thousand dollars was handed them by Mr. Dilworth.

"I just suggested to the county authorities that the reward offered some time ago belonged to you boys," said the good-hearted but gruff old fellow. "They agreed with me when they understood that I meant what I said. The check is sent with their compliments, which latter, however, you will probably not be able to get anything for at the bank."

Thus, full sixty days in advance of the date for the final payment on their car, the Auto Boys had money and to spare safely deposited to their credit. Pleased is too mild a word to describe properly their feelings. But, though they were glad and happy now, still further pleasure awaited them and grew wonderfully day by day.

They were arranging for a vacation. Truly they deserved one and as they invariably played as hard as they worked, needless to say they

hoped for much. Nor were they disappointed. The pleasures and happiness, the surprises and excitement the vacation time brought, however, make a story in themselves, which will be found in the next volume—"The Auto Boys' Outing."

Rider Agents WANTED



Choice of
44 Styles
Colors
and Sizes in
the Ranger line

you decide not to keep it.

Easy Payments

our special Factory-to-Rider cash prices.

Parts For All Bicycles

In the Ranger catalog you will find illustrated bicycle cranks, cups, cones, sprockets and a complete Universal Repair Hanger and Repair Front Forks designed to fit any and every bicycle ever manufactured in America. Complete instructions are given so that any boy can intelligently order the parts wanted. You will also find repair parts for all the standard makes of hubs and coaster-brakes and all the latest equipment and novelties.

Tires at Factory Prices

our savings in Trainload Tire Contracts and in the **Samson, Record and Hedgethorne** Tires get the best Tire values in America at Wholesale Factory Prices.

Send No Money

But write us TODAY for the Big Ranger Book and particulars of our 30 Day Free Trial Plan, wholesale prices and terms.

MEAD

CYCLE COMPANY
Dept. H211 CHICAGO, U.S.A.

Boys and young men everywhere are making good money taking orders for "Ranger" bicycles and bicycle tires.

You are privileged to select the particular style of Ranger bicycle you prefer: Motorbike model, "Arch-Frame," "Superbe" "Scout," "Special," "Racer," etc. While you ride and enjoy it in your spare time hours—after school or work, evenings and holidays—your admiring friends can be easily induced to place their orders through you.

Factory to Rider

Every purchaser of a Ranger bicycle (on our factory-direct-to-the-rider sales plan) gets a high-grade fully guaranteed model direct from the factory at wholesale prices, and is privileged to ride it for 30 days before final acceptance. If not satisfied it may be returned at our expense and no charge is made for the use of machine during trial.

Delivered to You FREE

We prepay the delivery charges on every Ranger from our factory in Chicago to your town and pay the return charges to Chicago if

if desired, at a small advance over



Share with us

SUMMER SNOW

AND

OTHER FAIRY PLAYS

By GRACE RICHARDSON

Finding there is a wide demand for plays which commend themselves to amateurs and to casts comprised largely of children, Miss Richardson, already well and widely known, has here given four plays which are unusually clever and fill this need. They call for but little stage setting, and that of the simplest kind, are suited to presentation the year around, and can be effectively produced by amateurs without difficulty.

CLOTH BINDING.....\$1.00

PUCK IN PETTICOATS

By GRACE RICHARDSON

Five plays about children, for children to play—Hansel and Gretel, The Wishing Well, The Ring of Salt, The Moon Dream, and Puck in Petticoats. Each is accompanied by stage directions, property plots and other helpful suggestions for acting. Some of the plays take but twenty minutes, others as long as an hour to produce, and every one of the five are clever.

CLOTH BINDING.....\$1.00

HANDY BOOK OF PLAYS FOR GIRLS

By DOROTHY CLEATHER

Not one of the six sparkling plays between these covers calls for a male character, being designed for the use of casts of girls only. They are easily, effectively staged—just the sort that girls like to play and that enthusiastic audiences heartily enjoy.

CLOTH BINDING.....\$0.50

FICTION FOR GIRLS

BETTY, The SCRIBE

By LILIAN TURNER

Drawings by KATHARINE HAYWARD GREENLAND

Betty is a brilliant, talented, impulsive seventeen-year-old girl, who is suddenly required to fill her mother's place at the head of a household, with a literary, impractical father to manage.

Betty writes, too, and every time she mounts her Pegasus disaster follows for home duties are neglected. Learning of one of these lapses, her elder sister comes home. Betty storms and refuses to share the honors until she remembers that this means long hours free to devote to her beloved pen. She finally moves to the city to begin her career in earnest, and then—well, then comes the story.

"Miss Turner is Miss Alcott's true successor. The same healthy, spirited tone is visible which boys and girls recognized in **LITTLE MEN** and **LITTLE WOMEN**." — *The Bookman*

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated - \$1.00

Elizabeth Hobart at Exeter Hall

By JEAN K. BAIRD

Illustrated by R. G. VOSBURGH

A spirited story of every-day boarding-school life that girls like to read. Full of good times and girlish fun.

Elizabeth enters the school and loses no time in becoming one of the leading spirits. She entertains at a midnight spread, which is recklessly conducted under the very nose of the preceptress, who is "scalped" in order to be harmless, for every one knows she would never venture out minus her front hair; she champions an ostracized student; and leads in a daring plan to put to rout the Seniors' program for class day.

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated - \$1.00

Books sent postpaid on receipt of price.

The Saalfeld Publishing Co.,
AKRON, OHIO

THE BRADEN BOOKS

FAR PAST THE FRONTIER

By JAMES A. BRADEN

The sub-title "Two Boy Pioneers" indicates the nature of this story—that it has to do with the days when the Ohio Valley and the Northwest country were sparsely settled. Such a topic is an unfailing fund of interest to boys, especially when involving a couple of stalwart young men who leave the East to make their fortunes and to incur untold dangers.

"Strong, vigorous, healthy, manly."—*Seattle Times*.

CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

By JAMES A. BRADEN

The author once more sends his heroes toward the setting sun. "In all the glowing enthusiasm of youth, the youngsters seek their fortunes in the great, fertile wilderness of northern Ohio, and eventually achieve fair success, though their progress is hindered and sometimes halted by adventures innumerable. It is a lively, wholesome tale, never dull, and absorbing in interest for boys who love the fabled life of the frontier."—*Chicago Tribune*.

THE TRAIL of THE SENECA

By JAMES A. BRADEN

In which we follow the romantic careers of John Jerome and Return Kingdom a little farther.

These two self-reliant boys are living peaceably in their cabin on the Cuyahoga when an Indian warrior is found dead in the woods nearby. The Seneca accuses John of witchcraft. This means death at the stake if he is captured. They decide that the Seneca's charge is made to shield himself, and set out to prove it. Mad Anthony, then on the Ohio, comes to their aid, but all their efforts prove futile and the lone cabin is found in ashes on their return.

CAPTIVES THREE

By JAMES A. BRADEN

A tale of frontier life, and how three children—two boys and a girl—attempt to reach the settlements in a canoe, but are captured by the Indians. A common enough occurrence in the days of our great-grandfathers has been woven into a thrilling story.

BOUND IN CLOTHETTE, with frontis- \$0.60
piece and colored jacket, postpaid each -

The Saalfeld Publishing Co.
AKRON, OHIO

MARY A. BYRNE'S BOOKS

THE FAIRY CHASER

"Telling of two boys who go into the vegetable and flower-raising business instead of humdrum commercial pursuits. The characters and situations are realistic."

—PHILADELPHIA TELEGRAPH

LITTLE DAME TROT

One of the most pleasing of juveniles, made pathetic by the strength with which the author pictures the central figure, a little girl made miserable by her mother's strict adherence to a pet "method" of training.

THE LITTLE WOMAN IN THE SPOUT

"This pleasing story may have been developed from real life, from real children, so true a picture does it portray of girlish life and sports."

—GRAND RAPIDS HERALD

ROY AND ROSYROCKS

A glowing Christmas tale, fresh and natural in situations, that will interest both boys and girls.

It tells how two poor children anticipate the joys of the holiday, and how heartily they enter into doing their part to make the day merry for themselves and others.

Each of the above bound in Boards, 12mo - \$0.60

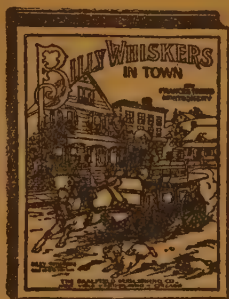
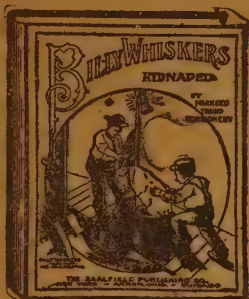
PEGGY-ALONE

The chronicles of the Happy-Go-Luckys, a crowd of girls who did not depend upon riches for good times. This club was very stretchable as to membership, so they elected Peggy-Alone from pity of her loneliness. Freed from governess, nurse and solicitous mother, she has the jolliest summer of her life.

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated by Anna B. Craig - \$1.00

BOOKS SENT PREPAID ON RECEIPT OF PRICE

The Saalfeld Publishing Co.
AKRON, OHIO



The

BILLY WHISKERS SERIES

BY

FRANCES TREGO MONTGOMERY

Billy Whiskers — frolicsome, mischief-making, adventure-loving Billy Whiskers — is the friend of every boy and girl the country over, and the things that happen to this wonderful goat and his numerous animal friends make the best sort of reading for them.

As one reviewer aptly puts it, these stories are "just full of fun and good times," for Mrs. Montgomery, the author of them, has the happy faculty of knowing what the small boy and his sister like in the way of fiction.

TITLES

BILLY WHISKERS

BILLY WHISKERS' KIDS

BILLY WHISKERS, JR.

BILLY WHISKERS' TRAVELS

BILLY WHISKERS AT THE CIRCUS

BILLY WHISKERS AT THE FAIR

BILLY WHISKERS' FRIENDS

BILLY WHISKERS, JR. AND HIS CHUMS

BILLY WHISKERS' GRANDCHILDREN

BILLY WHISKERS' VACATION

BILLY WHISKERS KIDNAPED

BILLY WHISKERS' TWINS

BILLY WHISKERS IN AN AEROPLANE

BILLY WHISKERS IN TOWN

BILLY WHISKERS IN PANAMA

Each Volume a Quarto, Bound in Boards, Cover and Six Full Page Drawings in Colors, Postpaid Price \$1.50

The Saalfield Publishing Co., Akron, Ohio

The Children's Encyclopedia

The young child asks of the parent explanations of the most simple phenomena and of the most profound problems. And in too many cases the parent is unable to answer. This work will overcome that difficulty. It tells "the reason why" simply, plainly and fully so the child may understand.

Why

do we dream?

What is thunder?

IT IS A VERITABLE ENCYCLOPEDIA, ANSWERING QUESTIONS THAT ARISE DAILY IN THE HOME.

What makes the rainbow?

"Armed with this little manual, which is admirably indexed and profusely illustrated, one could face the most inquisitive stranger or even his infant son with perfect equanimity."

—San Francisco Chronicle

Why do sea-shells "roar"?

Why is the sea salt?

Why are the lips red?

Why have fish

fins?

BOUND IN CLOTH, POSTPAID PRICE 25c

BOUND IN LEATHER, POSTPAID PRICE 50c

The SAALFIELD PUBLISHING CO
AKRON, OHIO

FLOWER BABIES

VERSES
BY

ELIZABETH
MAY



ILLUSTRATIONS BY

IDA MAY
ROCKWELL

One Hundred Flowers Shown in Their Natural Colors

Each one of the hundred pages in *Flower Babies* carries a verse about children and flowers. The drawing on the page bears out the flower idea, showing the blossoms in the beautiful colors Nature gives them as they grow.

There is so much genuine love in the way these verses and pictures speak that the book has won the warmest of welcomes from the children.

WHAT OTHERS THINK

"The idea of the book is good—to familiarize children with the common flowers."—*New York Globe*.

"Its brilliancy of color would be sufficient to attract the childish eye were it not in its versified text amusing and clever."—*Boston Transcript*.

Quarto, Bound in Boards, Every Page in Colors.

Postpaid Price, \$1.25

The Saalfield Publishing Co., Akron, Ohio

RALPH MARLOWE

A Tale of the Buckeye State

By

DR. JAMES BALL NAYLOR

Author of "THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET"

"There is an atmosphere about the story of RALPH MARLOWE—the picturesque atmosphere of quiet, rustic southeastern Ohio, and there is an equal measure of delicious humor and delicate pathos about it also.

Get this novel and read it—
The time will be well spent."

—*North American,*
Philadelphia.

"Dr. Naylor has constructed a very readable story. He has been remarkably successful in transferring to the canvas of fiction Ohio farmers and village folk, and the story is worthy to take its place beside the best of those written in recent years which take as their particular task the picturing of life in rural districts."

American Monthly Reviews
of Reviews.

Handsomely bound in bright red cloth, gold lettered, emblematic cover design in white and gold, 12 mo. 75cts.

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING
COMPANY • • • Akron, Ohio

DO YOU WANT YOUR FORTUNE TOLD?

**DO YOU WANT TO TELL
THE FORTUNE OF OTHERS?**



PALMISTRY

By MRS. EDWIN SYMMES

PALMISTRY contains complete and explicit instructions how to predict the destiny, disposition, traits of character, etc., from the lines in the palm and the shape of the hand and fingers.

Outline drawings are given which show each line or mark on the hand, with statements as to what each indicates.

Provide hours of amusement for yourself, and evenings of entertainment for your friends by the purchase of **PALMISTRY**.

BOUND IN CLOTH, POSTPAID..... \$0.50

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY

AKRON, OHIO

CHARACTER READING

BY

Mrs. Henry Symes

AN ATTRACTIVE hand-book on how to tell the ability, disposition, faults, graces, and characteristics in general by the lines of the face, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, chin, etc., etc.

Most of the books on physiognomy are technical, but **Character Reading** is a book for practical, every-day use, discussing each feature in a clear, concise manner, and presenting facts in a form easily understood. Also contains a complete

Alphabetical Guide to Delineating Character

and through this any special attribute with statement as to what particular lines denote its presence may be found at a moment's notice.

HARRY THURSTON PECK, in the *N. Y. American*, says :

"In it are given very simply the principal facts about the reading of character through the study of physiognomy. The author describes the different features—the eyes, nose, mouth, and chin—and states just what is denoted by the various types of each. What she says is strictly true—as true as a mathematical demonstration, and in her pages we have found nothing to criticise. . . . The book is really valuable, and if you will test its rules by applying them to the persons whom you know best, and to yourself, you will see how wonderfully exact they are."

CHARACTER READING

Is attractively bound in cloth, with dainty design of a Greek head in gold on the front cover.

Oblong, 12mc; 135 pages. Price, 50 cts.

Sent postpaid by

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY,

AKRON, OHIO.

